

# A Karakul carpet makes a home

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*The karakul sheep was introduced into Namibia one hundred years ago. Yet the use of karakul wool for carpet-weaving was only explored here close to fifty years later by the first pioneers of what today has become a typically Namibian product: the hand-woven karakul carpet, with designs depicting our country's natural and cultural heritage.*



In his book *The Karakul Industry in S.W.A.*, written in the early 1950s, D.C. Krogh writes 'Although the sheep which produces the valued Persian lamb pelt was introduced into S.W.A., the art of producing the valuable Persian carpet from its wool was left behind.' The karakul industry in South West Africa was built entirely around the lamb pelts, which became known as Swakara, the 'black diamonds' of the desert.

Karakul sheep thrive in arid conditions and were thus well suited to Namibia's dry South. They originate from the Asian steppe and are apparently an off-shoot of the Anan sheep, which occurred in the area of Turkestan around 8 000 BC. The name Karakul is said to mean 'black rose', and Turkestan has been famous for its 'Persian' lamb pelts since time immemorial. Namibia's stocks were mostly imported from Buchara in Uzbekistan, initially via Germany.

The idea of introducing the sheep into German South West Africa is attributed to two men: Paul Thorer, owner of the Persian trade house 'Theodor Thorer' in Leipzig, and Professor Julius Kuhn, director of the Institute for Animal Breeding at the University of Halle. It was enthusiastically taken up by the South West African Governor, Friedrich von Lindequist, who imported the first twelve animals in 1907, keeping about half as a government flock and providing the others to an experienced farmer, Albert Voigts of Voigtsgrund. These were the first Karakul sheep in southern Africa. They thrived, and a number of larger shipments were imported over the next few years to lay the foundations for an industry that became one of Namibia's most

important agricultural sectors for many years.

Karakul lambs have shiny, tightly-curved black wool at birth. As the animals grow, the curls open and become more wave-like, straightening almost entirely with age. The wool also loses its lustre and lightens to greyish-white. The fleece is composed of an outer covering of long, coarse guard hairs and an under-coat of shorter, soft and downy fibres that resemble true merino wool, but lack crimping. Because of its hair-like characteristics and durability, the wool was classified by the trade as 'carpet wool', but carpet production using the wool was not explored in South West Africa for many years.

Karakul farmers were in fact getting such low prices for their wool that they could not even cover their production and delivery costs and so had very little interest in selling this by-product. So low was the value of the wool that it was being used for road repairs on farms, as it is apparently quite suitable for binding sandy roads.

By the 1950s, more viable uses of the wool as an alternative source of income were finally being propagated: 'The use of S.W. African Karakul wool in the local manufacture of blankets, saddle cloths, shawls, coarse knitting yarns, ordinary woollen carpets, hair yarn carpets and various types of felts, appears to be a greater possibility' wrote Desmond Krogh.

Interestingly, the beginnings of Karakul weaving on the farm Ibenstein in 1952 are linked not only to the 'black diamond' trade, but also to the discovery of the real stones in South West Africa in 1908. August Stauch was instrumental in the



diamond discovery near Lüderitz and, through money earned from mining the precious gems, bought land in central Namibia and began farming with Karakul sheep. His daughter Marianne had studied art in Germany and started experimenting with carpet production using the otherwise discarded wool.

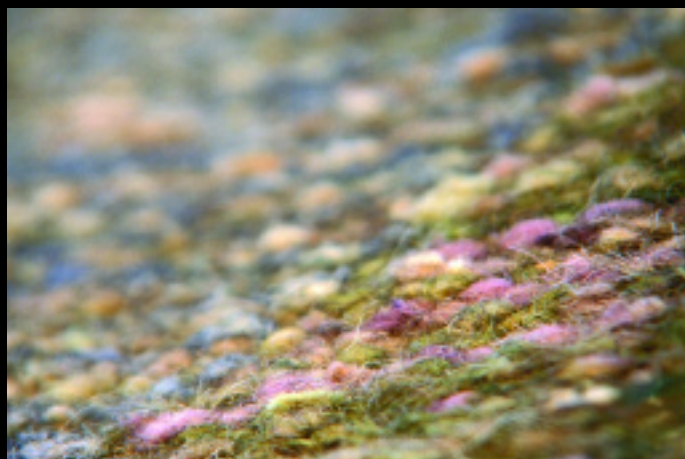
The idea had come from her father-in-law who, originally from Russia, knew that Karakul wool makes excellent carpets. With the help of a master-weaver from Germany, Marianne and her husband Nikolai Krafft were able to turn the idea into a viable production. Initially the carpets were hand-knotted using undyed wool. Once the best production methods had been found, intricate designs were hand-woven using a wide range of dyed colours. In time, Marianne passed the business on to her daughter Berenike, who in turn has given the reins to her own daughter Anne in 2002.

The success of Ibenstein Weavers did not go unnoticed and several other enterprising people set up weaving mills over the next few decades. Dorka Teppiche opened in the sixties, followed by Webschule Karibib in the late seventies, as well as by Karakulia and later Kirikara Art. All became well-established carpet producers in Namibia and each now has its own, recognisable style and market niche.

An artist like Volker Berner, the founder of Dorka Teppiche, uses carpet weaving as a medium for exquisite abstract art, created from an incredible range of subtle, individually dyed hues. Volker has his works hanging on the walls of galleries, as well as adorning the floors of homes. Ibenstein Weavers continues to use the work of a few well-know local artists alongside their own wide range of geometric and natural designs. Claudia von Hase of Kirikara Art creates her unique carpets through the innovative use of strong colours and graphic patterns, while Karakulia largely concentrates on depicting Namibia's landscapes and wildlife.

While many weavers dye their wool, some, such as Woven Arts of Africa (which began as Webschule Karibib), use only the natural colour of the wool to create their carpets. The available range is surprisingly diverse, from black through shades of brown, ochre, beige and grey to off-white. Krogh already enthused about this possibility in his book in the fifties: '...it is precisely in this natural colour range that its intrinsic value lies...attractive colour effects are obtained which cannot be imitated by artificial colouring.'

All Namibian weaving mills produce a range of products, from large, room-filling carpets to small runners and wall-hangings. Most are flexible and innovative enough to produce carpets to precise customer specifications, even weaving designs supplied by customers. Many welcome visitors to



their workshops and provide them with an overview of the weaving process.

Carpet production, from the raw wool to the finished carpet giving life and African flair to a room, is a long and intricate process. It includes washing, combing, spinning, dyeing and weaving the wool, as well as of course the designing of the carpet motif. The industry thus employs quite a number of people working behind the scenes, who complete the various production steps that lead to the final carpet.

Most important, though, are the highly-skilled African weavers, many of whom are also incorporating their own designs and individual styles into the production. Thus the carpet designs of most mills are being infused more and more by truly African imagery. It is likely that the entire production of some mills will in time be managed by the weavers themselves.

For their wool supply, the weavers remain dependant on Karakul farmers, both in Namibia and South Africa. But the true glory days of the Karakul pelt have waned. Already in the late 1950s the Karakul industry, aware that their suc-

cess was entirely dependant on fashion, had noted that 'It is well known that Dame Fashion is a fickle jade'. Some thirty years later this premonition became unfortunate reality. The mainstay of the Karakul industry, the Swakara pelt, experienced a considerable downslide as part of the partial collapse of the international fur trade. This caused many farmers to turn to meat-producing sheep and reduce or even give up their Karakul stock.

The local Karakul weaving industry continued to thrive, however, and weaving mills were willing to pay good prices for quality wool, giving farmers at least some alternative income. Today, Karakul pelts are once again fetching high prices in Europe, and farming with the sheep is on the increase again. But 'Dame Fashion' is still fickle, and the consumer world is being flooded more and more with cheap products of all shapes, sizes, colours and qualities. While there might be ever-increasing floor-covering alternatives, nothing beats a Karakul carpet for its durability, its warmth and artistic flair. If 'clothes make the man', then the Karakul carpet makes the home.

