

Rugged individualists

These days, the artwork is often what's unfurled on the floor

By Wendy Donahue
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An interior design riddle: For every four-sided room, how many walls are there to consider?

Six, asserts Dallas-based Elaine Williamson (elainewilliamsondesigns.com). And for many clients, the floor has become the most important one to get right.

Allergies, animals and eco-consciousness continue to roll back the wall-to-wall carpet in favor of a hard surface. So the key mood-setter/personality-indicator/style dictator becomes ...

The rug.

It might be anything from an unobtrusive sisal (everywhere) to a penetrating Fornasetti gaze (roubinirugs.com). What it's less likely to be these days, in a new space anyway, is a classic Oriental.

"For the most part clients aren't even asking about them anymore," says Williamson. "There's a new breed of rugs out there, and it's very design-oriented, sophisticated and artful."

In the "Sex and the City 2" movie, the most eye-catching, enviable styles have moved from the stars to the sets. Red and pink blooms on the "Candy Flower" rug steal the spotlight in the otherwise mostly neutral living room of Carrie (Sarah Jessica Parker) and John (Chris Noth). The rug even has fashion credibility, created by designer brand Marni for the Rug Co. (therugcompany.info), one of a handful that specialize in statement-making rugs, often in collaboration with fashion designers, artists and architects.

Still, it's an overstatement to say a rug should always be the masterpiece, or even square one, for a room, says Margaret Russell, editor-in-chief of Elle Decor.

"The starting point should be something you love," she says. "If that's a rug, that's great, because it is the foundation, the base, of what everything goes on. A lot of people look at a rug as a focal point. Others look at it as the equivalent of a good paint job."

Few in either camp would argue this point: "There are some beautiful rugs out there now," Russell says.

Rug layering has added another dimension. Sisal in summer can be topped with a heavier rug in winter. Or sisal can be

embellished — famously, in a rug belonging to George Stephanopoulos and his wife, Ali Wentworth.

"They have an aging family dog and the dog had had a few accidents on it," Russell recounts from a story that made the cover of Elle Decor as well as the "Oprah" show.

Wentworth wanted a new rug; Stephanopoulos didn't. So Wentworth bought fabric dye in lavender.

"She did this almost starburst pattern all over this creamy rug," to disguise the dog's crime scenes, Russell says. "George came home and said, 'I told you I didn't want to get a rug yet!'"

"Sisal doesn't need to be boring," says Russell.



Rugs: Style pointers

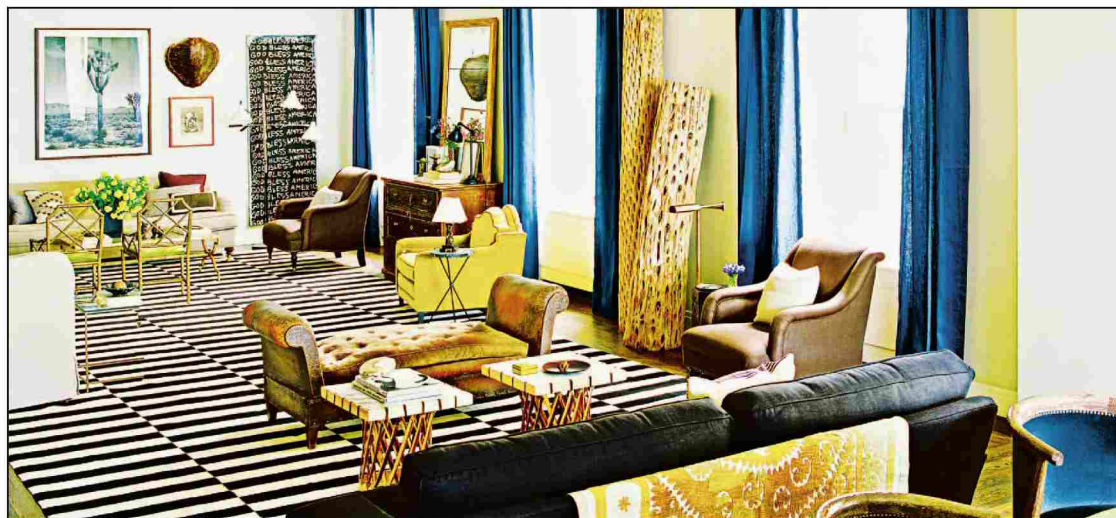
No-fail recipe Pair a statement rug with quieter furniture. Or reverse the equation: Opt for a neutral base and choose bolder furnishings.

Let love lead Despite conventional wisdom, a rug doesn't have to be the starting point for a room. A favorite object, painting or piece of furniture can supply colors and style cues.

Mix it up Pattern on a rug is less intense than the same pattern at eye level, which is one reason a geometric or Oriental rug can coexist peacefully with prints on furniture.



On Margaret Russell's list of interesting modern rugs? Faux zebra (here from Jonathan Adler), Tony Duquette's malachite pattern and Madeline Weinrib's striped cotton.



Madeline Weinrib's striped rug mixes beautifully with solid upholstery and ethnic textures in designer Nate Berkus' living room.

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