

HUDSON RIVER RUG HOOKERS

Called America's one indigenous folk art, hooked rugs were primarily made to satisfy a practical need to give the illusion of manufactured carpets to rural homes. The popularity of hooked rugs was due largely to the importation of jute burlap from the East Indies beginning around 1850. The loose weave of burlap provides an ideal and economical base fabric for pulling up loops of strips of fabric to form a pile on the top side.

The designs of the first rugs were drawn by the makers using patterns and scenes from their daily lives. Later in the century, and up to the present, many hooked rugs were made with pre-stenciled and manufactured patterns. Colors in these early rugs were as varied as any painter's palette. Most early dyeing of colors was done with natural materials, with synthetic dyes expanding color choices later in the century.

As the 19th century came to a close the popularity of hooked rugs waned as more affordable commercial carpets became available. Pockets of rug hooking continued with cottage industries throughout New England, and most importantly, the rugs made and sold through the Grenfell Mission in Labrador. The colonial revival period in the 1920's and 30's brought about another resurgence of hooking. Materials and tools were improved and more widely available. After World War II women, particularly, had more leisure time to spend hooking magnificent, finely shaded rugs which indeed seemed "painted with wool".

Today rug hooking is enjoying a great resurgence in popularity with many makers returning to the early ingenuity and resourcefulness of original rug makers. It has spread across the United States and into other countries. The contemporary rug hooker enjoys creating original designs and dyeing colors specifically for that design and while many are still used as rugs, as many are art forms to hang on the wall.

The Hudson River Rug Hookers, a contemporary hooking group of women, has been meeting in Croton for more than 25 years with Marilyn Bottjer of Kendal on Hudson in Sleepy Hollow as their teacher. The number of members has waxed and waned, some have been there since the beginning, others joined just last year. They have embraced the art of rug hooking using new methods and new materials. Instead of the traditional burlap backing which turns out to not be a very long lived material, they are using linen, monkscloth and rug warp (the latter two are cotton fabrics). Instead of simply pulling up loops of strips cut from wool fabrics they are using other hooking techniques such as Proddy (largely used in the United Kingdom and the Maritime Provinces of Canada), punch hooking (a technique dating from the end of the 19th century which largely uses rug yarn) and decorative stitches translated into hooking stitches. Instead of the formerly obligatory 100% wool which is cut into narrow strips, varying from 3/32" to as wide as you can pull through the backing, they are recycling Tee shirts, felted sweaters, ribbons, metallics, yarns of all kinds, cottons, etc. They are appliquing on patches, sewing on buttons and bows. In addition to this art for the walls, they are also creating wonderful, usable rugs for the floor out of new wool and recycled wool clothing.