

Using this Book

This book is devoted to teaching the techniques of standard crocheted and fabric tapestry rugs. Each shape of crocheted rug is presented in the order of its complexity. The round shape is covered first, since it is the basic shape and is modified to make all of the other shapes. Begin with a round hotpad with standard crochet to become familiar with handling fabric strip. From that point, you can proceed to the other shapes or take on a round hotpad with fabric tapestry.

The fabric tapestry patterns are graded from beginner, through novice and intermediate to advanced techniques. You will find it easiest to work at least one pattern at the beginner and novice levels before attempting some of the fancier patterns. This sounds like a long process, but, for example if you wanted to make the “Star of Bethlehem” rug on the cover, begin with a round hotpad, then a small pinwheel (beginner) design which will then transform into the center of a diamond pattern (novice). From that point, you can start a novice level star which is also the center of a Star of Bethlehem rug.

The “handbook” at the end of the book is a general reference with fabric characteristics, requirements, and special techniques for particular effects.

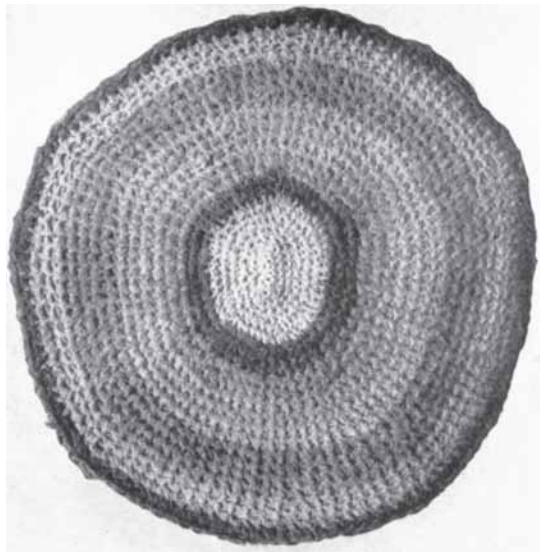
INTRODUCTION

Rag rugs have been crocheted for at least 150 years in North America, but since crochet was a common household skill, early directions for the making of crocheted rugs were on the order of “just crochet with the stuff.” A sample of that type of directions from the *American Farm Journal* in 1871:

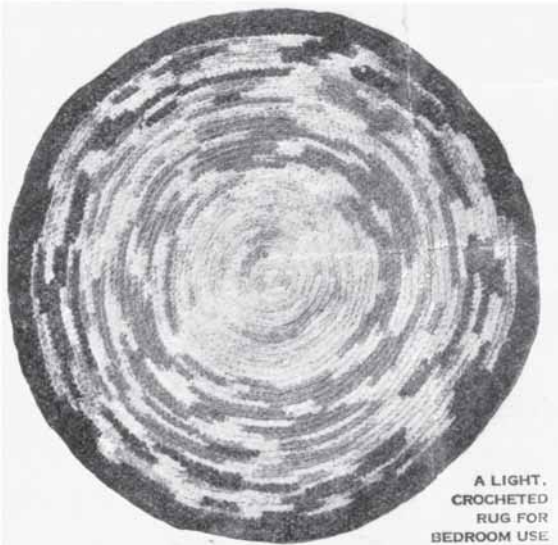
“If one has plenty of old delaines or thin woolen goods, she may tear them in strips a half inch wide and knit them on coarse wooden needles or crochet them with a large crochet needle, and arrange the different colors tastefully...”

Similarly, *The Woman's Book*, published by Woman's Home Companion in 1907 gives directions:

“Having collected about twenty-five pounds of flannel rags and having dyed them the desired shades they must now be torn into strips about an inch wide, and these must be neatly sewn together, overlapping about half an inch, so that the joining is strong. Now procure a length of clothesline rope, and commence to crochet the flannel strips over the rope. This is begun in the center, like any crochet wheel for a chair back...”



Most early crocheted rugs were relatively crude as in this example from Amy Mali Hicks “The Craft of Hand-Made Rugs” 1914



Crocheted rugs were also featured in women's publications like this example from "Plain and Fancy Needlework" (June 1917).

There were no directions for actually crocheting the rug, only discussions of the fabrics and colors used in them. However, the history of crocheted rugs is indicated by the author's introduction: "Of all the hand-made rugs of our grandmothers days, now so popular again, some of the most interesting are the crocheted rugs; and they are perhaps the most durable, as no thread is used in the making."

In "Handmade Rugs" by Ella Shannon Bowles (1927), the rug below is described as being crocheted over "binding twine."

Her directions for crocheting a rug are: "Start with a chain of three...and in the first stitch make seven single crochet stitches. Crochet around and around this centre, increasing enough to keep the work flat and perfectly circular in shape."



During the same period, crocheted rugs were also made with recycled stockings instead of rags. The stockings had a built-in stretch and resilience so that they acted like yarns and held their shape with rugs. Examples of the stocking rugs surviving show the perfectly symmetrical shape of the yarn patterns and many are still in use after many decades.

CROCHETED STOCKING RUG

HERE is a lovely bedroom rug made of old silk stockings dyed turquoise blue and gold.

Size 27" in diameter.

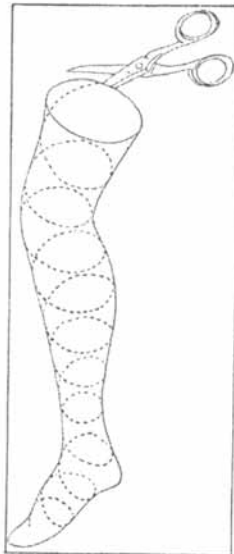
To prepare materials The first step is to dye the stockings. There are many particularly beautiful colors to be had in silk dyes — batik dyes are especially recommended.

It is likely that your collection of stockings will be in several shades of one color, so that when they are dyed, they will vary in tone. This will give added attractiveness to the rug.

Cut each stocking into one long bias strip, starting at the top, as in diagram. When cutting, make allowance for difference in weight of stocking. Cut thin stockings 3" wide; cut heavier stockings narrower so that the "strips" will be of uniform thickness. Sew stocking strips together and wind into a ball.

Directions The whole rug is done in single crochet. Begin with 3 chain stitches and join with a slip stitch to form a ring. Crochet 6 rows of turquoise, 1 gold, 2 turquoise, 5 gold, 8 turquoise, and 4 gold. To add a new color, simply sew it to the old.

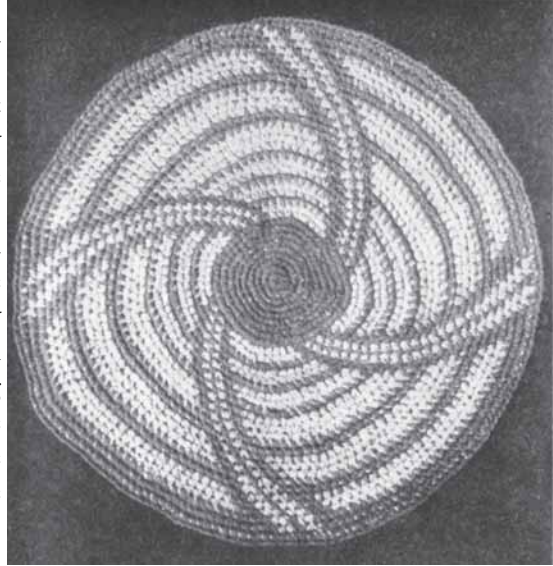
Be sure to add enough stitches on each row, in order to enlarge the circle properly.



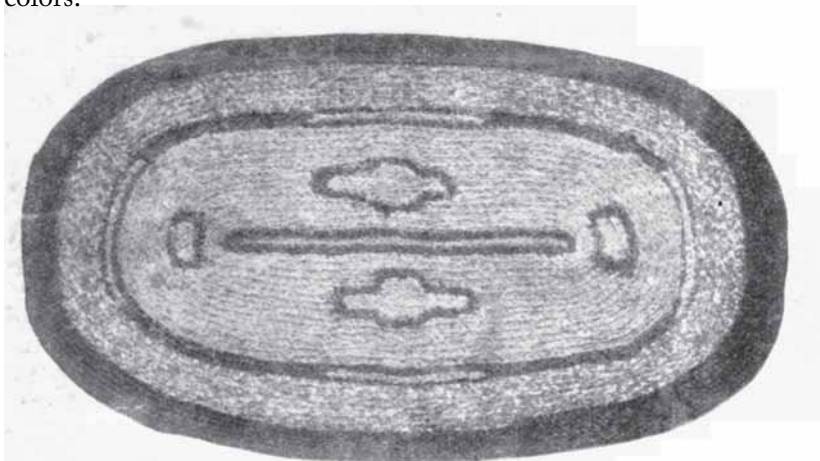
The complete directions for a depression-era crocheted rug made from stockings. Note the spiral cutting.

Rag rugs using the fabric tapestry technique were much rarer, and the fabrics to create patterns were hand-dyed. The rug below from Amy Mali Hicks "The Craft of Handmade Rugs" (1914) was the first one I came across. Seeking further information, I contacted the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

I was surprised to find that the Hicks' rug was also the only fabric tapestry rug that they could find. The directions that Hicks gives for the rug use a variable increase pattern. Apparently Hicks was an accomplished rug maker and created the rug by "feel" and wrote the directions as she worked.



Later, I did come across another fabric tapestry rug of an oval shape (below) in "Plain and Fancy Needlework" magazine (June, 1917). The accompanying article did not mention the technique or give any directions, simply labeling the rug "A design crocheted of harmonious colors."



Crocheted & Fabric Tapestry Rugs

By the 1930s and 1940s, a new strategy for creating a reliable rug pattern developed. Directions specified that fabric strips for rugs be cut on the bias so that the strips would stretch and behave similarly to yarns. Then, standard yarn patterns could be used for rugs. In the end, however, the bias-cut fabric strips continued to stretch after the rug was made and especially when it was washed. The rugs stretched out of shape permanently and became relegated to barns, attics and basements.

There are two basic strategies to crochet rugs with fabric strip. The earliest and easiest was to treat fabric strip just as if it were yarn and crochet a rug back-and-forth in rows using single or double crochet stitches. These rugs work reasonably well with thin fabric strip (one inch or less) and the problem of keeping the rug laying flat was avoided.

The second group of crocheted rug constructions are worked in rounds and referred to as “radial” patterns. These rugs are actually made as a continuous spiral and since each round makes the rug larger, extra stitches need to be added regularly to allow the rug to lie flat. It is these types of rugs that cause the most difficulty since the increase patterns which worked so reliably with yarns (six extra stitches per round) simply did not work with heavier fabric strip.

Writers of rug making directions adopted various strategies to get around the problem. Some just avoided it entirely by directing the rug maker to “increase as necessary to make the rug lie flat.” That left the rug maker on her own to develop a technique that worked. She learned to crochet rugs by “feel”—if the rug began to cup she’d add more stitches. These rugs sometimes were regularly shaped with tight stitching simply because the rug maker had had a lot of practice working with fabric strip. Quite a few of these old rugs have survived from the early to mid-1900s.

Even the notable Ami Mali Hicks, who first published the technique of fabric tapestry, could only give the most general advice about crocheted rugs. Her 1914 book, *The Craft of Handmade Rugs* directs: “Double the stitches occasionally in these first rounds, just enough to keep the center of the rug from ‘cupping’ but not enough to make it ‘full up.’...doubling takes place a regular intervals and always comes in the longest count of each round.”

Some of the rugs “made by feel” became the basis for written directions. If a rug looked good, it was dissected and the stitch pattern written down. Unfortunately, when someone else tried to reproduce the effect, most often the result was not at all satisfactory, since these patterns were specific to the exact material in the original rug and the personal touch of the rug maker.

When I began researching rug structures, even contemporary sources such as *Better Homes and Gardens* (“Rug Making”, 1978) were still publishing directions for crocheted rugs saying “increase as necessary” which was not useful. I really had expected to be able to pick up any basic needlework guide and find directions for crocheting rag rugs. It astonished me that there simply were none.

Rug yarn manufacturers could offer reliable results for making rugs with their products and published numerous pamphlets of directions. Why the yarn patterns didn’t work with fabric strip puzzled me. So, as an experienced crocheter, I moved confidently forward thinking that I could certainly “increase as necessary.” I began with a yarn pattern, and as it began to cup, I added increases. Then the rug began to wave, so fewer increases...The result I dubbed “The Sombrero Syndrome.”

In the early 1980s, I began to conduct experiments with fabric strip for crocheted rugs to determine why the old radial patterns did not work like they did with rug yarns. The first fact I discovered was that fabric strip—even when cut on the bias—simply does not act the same way as yarns do. Straight-cut fabric strip has no “give” and, while bias-cut fabric will stretch out, it doesn’t have the resilience to resume its original shape.

It took some years experimenting with straight-cut fabric strip, but eventually I did develop a standard increase pattern that would work. For consistency during the experiments I adopted a standard width of fabric strip (one and one-half inches) which was the minimum needed for a consistent double-fold to hide the raw edges of the strip. The result was a standard increase that worked consistently, and made the development of fabric patterns an easy transition. The patterns in this of this book are all based on that standard width and increase, but if you want to use other widths or types of fabrics, see Chapter 15.

**IF YOU ALREADY KNOW HOW TO CROCHET,
READ THIS FIRST**
I Mean It!

Millions of people know how to crochet and many have been crocheting with yarns for decades. If you're one of them, you are going to have trouble crocheting rag rugs simply because you are going to have to un-learn many of the habits you've acquired. The techniques for using fabric strip in crochet stitches are very different than what you've learned with yarn.

First, understand that fabric strip has a mind of its own. It will seek its "natural" stitch size no matter what size hook you use. You can make a crocheted rug with heavy wool fabric using the same hook as you would with a very light and narrow cotton strip. For years I used only a Boye, Size K metal hook for everything. The trick is to learn to let the fabric tell you how large the stitch should be, instead of expecting the hook to artificially control the size of the stitch.

Look at the various photographs of rugs-in-progress and notice that the crochet hook lies easily across the top of the work. With most fabric and hook combinations, you will need to pull up excess with each loop of the stitch to have the hook in that position. Whatever you do, don't work tightly. If you are an obsessively tight-crocheter, a very large hook can help (Q or above) but even then you may still be working too tightly. The test is that if you are struggling to make a stitch—you need to loosen up.



Fabric strip does not have the “give” that yarns do and it has a lot more body and friction. The stitches around the outside of a crocheted rug may appear to “stand up” from the surface instead of lying neatly along the edge. That appearance is caused by the way you hold the rug as you work and friction between the fabrics from one row to the next. Don’t be alarmed if you notice that look. Lay the rug face down and pat or stroke the stitches into position. Alternately, you can roll up the rug (right side out) and the recent stitches will find where they are supposed to be. Slick fabrics will show this tendency the least and rough fabrics, the most.

The stitches used with rug making are the same as with “regular” crochet, so you don’t have to know anything more than how to make a chain stitch, single crochet stitch and slip stitch to make the rugs shown. If you are a beginning crocheter, you can make rugs with only those most basic skills.

Learning to Crochet a High Quality Rug

There are a lot of crocheted rugs around today, but most of them are not quality rugs. Indications that a rug is poorly made include a loose structure, an open center, an irregular shape and a rough surface. Too many of the rugs being sold today at craft fairs are poor-quality rugs and they have turned many people away from the idea of crocheted rag rugs. If you pick up one of those rugs and your fingers go right through the surface holes, know that you’re holding a doily, not a rug.

By contrast a well made crocheted or fabric tapestry has a tight, even center, a smooth, tight surface and a regular shape. It feels heavy for its size and appears solid and sturdy. Look at the rugs in this book and you will notice that there aren’t holes or gaps in the surface. The surface stitches are so even that the designs nearly appear to be beaded rather than crocheted. (One husband visiting our rug shop confidently told his wife, “They have a machine in the back room to make them.”) Of course, that wasn’t true, but his impression that the rugs were so uniform, they were machine-made is the hallmark of a well made crocheted rug. That is the type of rug anyone can make—with the right directions.