

INTRODUCTION:

Knitted Rag Rugs in the Scheme of Things

There are literally hundreds of ways to make rag rugs and knitted rag rugs represent only a small fraction of those techniques. Rag rugs of all varieties were virtually ignored by the textile establishment until recent years, being relegated to the disdained arena of “craft work” in contrast to “fine needlework.” Knitted rugs were no exception. While knitting as a skill has been heavily documented in the past 200 years, the making of knitted rag rugs has not. Keep in mind also that excess fabric for making rugs simply wasn’t available in most of North America until the middle decades of the 1800s. Only isolated examples of knitted rag rugs exist prior to the US Civil War.

Rag rugs as we think of them are a relatively recent development in textile history. It was in fact the Industrial Revolution that made it possible for rag rugs to develop at all. Before the invention of powered looms all fabrics, from the heaviest woolens to the finest linens, were hand-woven. Clothing and every sort of household textile were handmade and what little scrap was left was likely to be pieced into a larger item. Worn out cloth was used for cleaning, so there simply was not much fabric left to be used for rugs.

Water-powered looms began to replace home weaving about 300 years ago but it was the steam powered loom that really increased the speed of cloth production and lowered the cost of textiles by the mid-1800s. It is from approximately that time that many of the rag rug methods originate.

Some of the methods used for rug making were a simple substitution of fabric strip for yarn in older textile constructions. For example, knitting has roots reaching far back into history so it was a natural step to move from knitting with yarn to knitting with fabric strip. Particularly since knitting was a widespread household skill, it was a simple conversion for people to make and early references to knitted rugs are vague because it was presumed that everyone knew how to knit.

Other methods used for rag rugs followed this same progression. Some creative soul simply wondered if a familiar process would work with a different material. Examples of this type of transition include: crocheting, naalbinding and hooking which all substituted strip for yarn; and braiding, flat wrap, twining, etc., which substituted fabrics in older basket-making techniques for natural fibers such as straw, rushes, bark and grasses.

It is by no means however that all of the rag rug methods were simply a new application of an older textile process. Indeed, the most interesting of the rug making methods seem to have developed *because of* the availability of excess or waste fabric. Remember that having any fabric “left over” was an unfamiliar concept, so in many ways scrap fabric became a completely new material to be put to use. Prodded rugs are a good example of a technique that seems to have developed (in Britain) as an application for leftover fabric. It was not a technique that lent itself to the use of yarns, but instead made use of a resource that had not existed before.

Another factor in the development of such a broad range of methods appears to be the cross-cultural influences that occurred during the settlement of North America. Pioneers on the frontiers came from many different textile traditions which seem to have combined to create new techniques or variations in rug making. And of course, here and there an extraordinary person had a feel for working with fabrics in rugs, so some of the techniques seem to have sprung from just a single inventive person. This is indeed still going on today and so the progression of rug constructions should not be considered a closed subject.

In the middle and late 1800s knitted rag rugs were regarded as utilitarian and directions for their construction are minimal. The garter stitch was used. Color schemes for the dyeing of the rags were sometimes included.

To Make Rag Rugs.

“Cut rags and sew hit and miss, or fancy striped as you choose; use wooden needles, round, smooth, and pointed at one end of any convenient length. The knitting is done back and forth (like old fashioned suspenders), always take off the first stitch.”

(1885, “Buckeye Cookery”)

Knitted and Crocheted Rugs

“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, sewing or crocheting the knit strips together, and surrounding the whole with a border of fringe or fancy-cut pieces. This kind of a rug keeps its shape better if lined with a firm piece of crash or bagging.”
(1871, *American Farm Journal*)

During the Arts and Crafts period (roughly 1890 to WWI), design and quality of construction was emphasized and wedge knitting is first described. Amy Mali Hicks wrote *The Craft of Handmade Rugs* in 1914, which became a standard reference for rugs and was reprinted many times until the late 1930s. Her writing influenced rug making through that period. Her book describes a strip construction rectangle (which she refers to as “oblong” in the following excerpt) and a circular wedge knit rug.



Hick's Oblong Rug, 1914

“The knitted rug is another rug which has reached the satisfactory standard of modern craftsmanship and is also a striking example of how successfully a rug based on a humble craft can be made if well-planned. Surely to paraphrase a familiar quotation, “The plan’s the thing.” The craft of knitting cannot be said to possess any technical difficulties. Almost any one can knit, though to be sure even so simple a performance as this can be done more or less well. But anything that is easy finds inexperienced enthusiasts, so the knitted rug of the hit or miss variety is more frequently met with than one which is carefully planned.

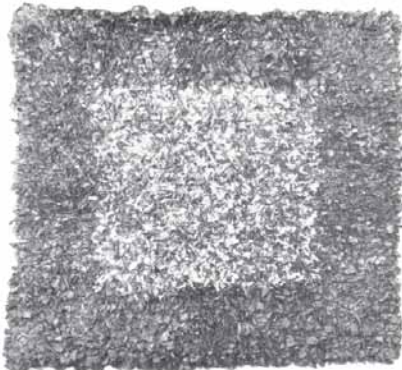
“Before the present revival in the handicrafts the old Colonial looms on which the farmer folk did their own weaving were discarded as old-fashioned and cumbersome and so when rugs or carpets were needed and there was no carpet weaver conveniently enough located to weave up balls of cut rags, the knitting needles were resorted to and the knitted fabric took the place of the woven one. . . .

“The materials generally used for making knitted rugs are old rags of either wool or cotton. This accounts to some extent for their somewhat uncared-for appearance as the design cannot be as well controlled. . .

“Since the materials from which these rugs are knitted, make a thick thread when cut into strips, the fabric itself is heavy and to make it easier to handle the square and oblong rugs are made in bands from eight inches to ten inches in width, and are afterward sewed together.”

(Hicks, Amy M. The Craft of Hand-Made Rugs, McBride, Nast & Co., NY, 1914)

During the 1920s, contemporary publications embellished knitted rugs emphasizing their artistic points and sometimes specifying silk as the material of choice as in the following excerpt.



Owned by Mrs. Mary Goodnow

Bowles' Fluff Mat, 1927

“Now let me tell you of a splendid way to use up bits of silks or knitting worsteds by making a ‘scrappy’ knitted rug. Long bone or wooden needles, a ball of heavy white knitting cotton, and a box of silk scraps about an inch and one half long and an inch wide—these are the required materials. Cast on thirty-six stitches and knit once across. On the next row, after knitting two stitches, knit a scrap of silk into the work. Knit two more plain stitches, then knit in another scrap of silk.

“Continue in this manner until the row is completed. Knit back across plain without any silk scraps; then knit another row, using two plain stitches and the third with silk scraps, until the rug is of the desired size. Five strips are needed, and usually the rug is square in shape. Hit-or-miss centres with deep black borders are pretty for these. After the strips are sewed together, the whole may be lined with heavy cotton cloth.”

(Bowles, Ella S., Handmade Rugs, Little, Brown and Co. 1927)

As the twentieth century progressed, rag rugs experienced periods of popularity and decline. The Depression era of the 1930s was an economic incentive for home manufacture of rag rugs but more affluent periods seem to have relegated the practice to a quaint outdated pastime with overtones of poverty. During the Depression of the 1930s Hicks’ book remained a standard and knitted rag rugs were fairly widely made. Quite a few examples of the wedge knit rag rugs have survived from that period. The rationing of the war years of the 1940s extended the practice of knitting with recycled clothing and stockings. Following World War II, references to knitted rugs became nearly the exclusive province of yarn and thread companies and the techniques of knitting with fabric strip gradually disappeared in favor of knitting with rug yarns. The prominence of knitting rugs with yarns continues to the current time, but interest in the revival of handwork of all sorts has brought knitted rag rugs increasing popularity.

These various influences, from ancient to modern times have created unlimited possibilities in rag rugs. The varieties of surface texture in knitted rugs alone range from the smooth and flat to rough and shaggy. Since so many different materials can be used with a single rug making method, it is possible to have the “same” rug look ultra-modern with a shiny high-tech finish or rustic and primitive. In short, knitted rag rugs belong almost anywhere these days and only the rug maker’s imagination is the limit.