

**Traditional
Shirred &
Standing Wool
Rugs**

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A Rugmaker's Sampler

Rugmaker's Handbook No. 4

**Traditional
Shirred &
Standing Wool Rugs**

Third Edition

*written and illustrated by,
Master Rugmaker
Diana Blake Gray*

*Rafter-four Designs
Cocolalla, Idaho*

Rugmaker's Handbook No. 4
Traditional Shirred & Standing Wool Rugs
Third Edition

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PREFACE

I am often asked what I mean by “traditional” rag rugs. My definition is that traditional rug techniques are those that were passed hand-to-hand, from one rug maker to the next. Though a few types of rag rugs were made in Europe, the vast majority of the techniques evolved in North America and, because of the cultural dynamics of the 19th and 20th centuries, most of those same techniques were also simply forgotten when they stopped being passed down.

Understanding how that happened, is a study in shifting populations. (I’ll be describing the United States, but the same process occurred in Canada.) During the 19th century, the vast majority of Americans lived in rural, isolated areas. Transportation and communication were slow and in frontier areas, farms, ranches and communities were, by necessity, as self-sufficient as possible. The principle of “waste not, want not” was simply a part of their way of life.

Isolation did not stymie inventiveness and creativity however. The plethora of rug making methods that developed during those days was the result of the settlers’ desire to use everything, combined with the desire to create something both beautiful and practical. Girls were schooled in a wide variety of needlework from an early age so the skills necessary to create rag rugs were widespread. It should not be surprising that in that type of environment so many different types of rugs were made. And once someone discovered a practical technique, it was passed along much as favorite recipes were shared.

By contrast, the Industrial revolution led to larger and larger concentrations of people in eastern cities, and in the last half of the 19th century improvements in printing made the production of mass market publications affordable to city dwellers. Ladies magazines

appeared—first for the more affluent like Godey’s Ladies Book—and then for the middle class. The magazines became both a means to disseminate information and arbiters of what sort of information was worthy of publication. “Fine needlework” was the order of the day and “rag” rugs were largely ignored. These city-based publications regarded themselves as too sophisticated for plebian rural skills, concentrating on the “fashionable” instead. Even by the early 20th century, books were being written to try to stem the tide of losing these rural skills, but only a very few found a market. (Amy Mali Hicks’ “The Craft of Hand-Made Rugs,” published in 1914, was a notable exception, but it should be noted that even she made an effort to cover the subject, shirred rugs were not included, likely because by that time they were largely forgotten.)

In the second half of the 20th century, the population of the US became dominantly urban, and rural traditions and practices were less and less valued. In the case of most of the rag rug techniques, it took only one generation for a rug method to fall out of use completely. Even to this day I hear the same story: “My grandmother made this rug, but my mother didn’t, and I wasn’t interested when I was a kid. Now grandma is gone and I don’t know how to do it.”

There were a few exceptions to this pattern of course. Loom woven rugs, hooked rugs and 3-strand braided rugs continued, as well as a few others. The one common factor among the surviving methods was that they had a commercial value of some kind. Businesses were built providing rug looms, rug hooks and printed patterns, braiding cones and wool, and various sorts of rug making gadgets. But for those rug making methods that didn’t require a special tool or material, there was no economic incentive to preserve the method and no cultural imperative to keep the tradition alive. Indeed, the making of “plain” rag rugs was generally disdained, being regarded as something only the poor did.

I find it fascinating that now, in the first decade of the 21st century, we have come full circle. The frontier principle of “waste not, want not” has been reborn in the desire to recycle to lessen our impacts on the planet. What began for me as an effort to document, pass along, and indeed celebrate, the creativity of pioneer ancestors, has become

fashionable in a way that I could never have foreseen. When I became seriously interested in traditional rugs during the 1970s, America was well into the trend of the “disposable” everything. By the early 1980s when I began in the rug making business many people were incredulous, saying things like “There can’t be enough people that would be interested to support a business.” Luckily, they were wrong, but most of the would-be rug makers in those days were from rural areas. Now, instead of hearing comments that I was born a hundred years too late, I’m regarded as an innovator for bringing these old ways back to life. What an astonishing turn of events.

And so it is that I present the fourth volume in the Rugmaker’s Handbook series covering traditional shirred and standing wool rugs. These techniques are a recycler’s dream since gorgeous rugs can be made using the tiniest scraps of leftover fabric or recycled clothing. To encourage just that, the Handbook section includes directions for preparing many types of cast-off clothing for these rugs. In the fine tradition of the pioneers, items include not just wool clothing, but the things that we all seem to accumulate from t-shirts and jeans to old sweaters and socks.

Also, in this book I’m continuing another aspect of the rug making traditions of the 19th century. During that period there was a lot of cross-pollination of textile traditions that had originated in the home countries of immigrants. While revising this third edition, it occurred to me that the methods of crocheted shirring would adapt to solve the tediousness of another technique—that of the crocheted version of the strung shag rugs. That adaptation is presented as a bonus chapter here with a technique I’m calling “postage stamp rugs” since they can be made with tiny scraps of fabric. As I’ve said before, the development of rug making methods is by no means a closed subject, and the postage stamp rugs are just another example showing that innovation in the rug making field is still open for the textile explorer.

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About the Author