

INTRODUCTION

The process of gathering fabric along a thread was used in antiquity, for both practical and decorative textiles. In rug making, the term “shirring” appears to have been applied to any rugs made by gathering since at least the mid-19th century. In sewing, the term shirring refers to using two or more parallel threads, but no one was being particular in describing rugs that used only a single thread for gathering fabric strip into folds.

True shirred rugs are completely made of shirred fabric with the shirred sections joined together to form the (reversible) rug. Some confusion has crept in because various authors have identified rugs as shirred rugs, when they really are not. When fabrics are gathered and then stitched to a base fabric, they belong to the family of “sewn shag rugs” rather than shirred rugs. Typical of this group is the “caterpillar” rugs of the 19th century in which a center-sewn shirred strip was sewn to a base fabric (ticking, duck or canvas).

Similarly, standing wool rugs are made solely of edge-set fabric strips and are reversible. Rugs where wool strips are sewn side-by-side to a base fabric also belong to the family of “sewn shag rugs.”

From existing examples, it isn't clear whether standing wool rugs preceded shirred rugs, since they appear in the same decade (1870-1880) but logic would presume that the simpler standing wool construction came first. Standing wool rugs have remained as a sewn rug construction virtually unchanged. Shirred rugs are a different story.

Early shirred rugs are all sewn (center-shirred or edge-shirred). By the 1890s examples occur where the shirred sections were made with a crochet chain, and then the chains sewn together (see the “Snow-on-the-Mountain” rug).


Around 1900 crocheted shirring was being done on slightly recurved afghan hooks (thus the “bent hook” term) and the chain shirred sections were being joined by crochet stitches also. Within 20 years, special crochet hooks were being marketed just for these rugs.

Because the processes of creating shirred rugs and standing wool rugs are so basic, the equipment used to make them is also of the very simplest nature. Thus, in trying to market tools for making these rugs in the twentieth century, an important aspect has been to give the tool an exotic name and avoid the simpler terms.

Some of the various gadgets for making shirred and standing wool rugs that have been marketed include:

—For the bent hook style of crocheted shirring, there have been the “Art Rug Needle,” the “Shirret”™ hook, the “Rugbee Rug Needle”, the “Schirren” hook and others of similar design.

Make Rugs the Modern, Fascinating, Thrifty Way with the
NEW ART RUG NEEDLE



THE NEEDLE WITH THE "HUMP"

You need only Carpet Warps.
Bias strips of OLD or NEW material - Wool, cotton or rayon.
Simple crochet stitch.
No Sewing.

Rugs are
Different
Luxurious
Reversible
Durable

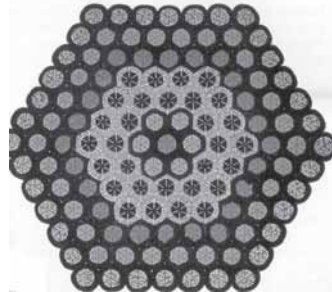
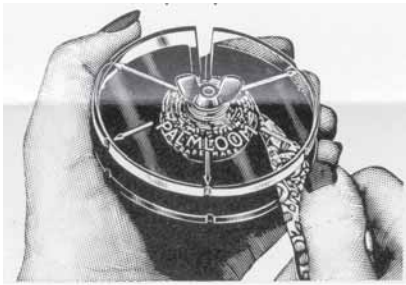
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MRS. BESSIE HANSON
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Price of Needle with Printed Directions \$1.00

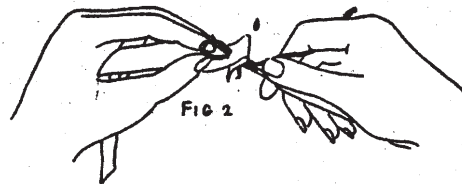
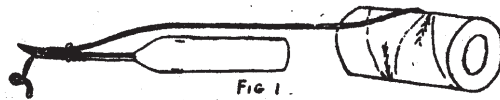
Circa 1920 advertisement for a bent-hook for crocheted shirring.

Several manufacturers including the Art Rug Needles (hooks) were marketed as a home business for women who learned to make the rugs, and then sold hooks and taught rug making to their friends. Similar marketing schemes were used for many household products of that period.

—For standing wool rugs, a wire wheel was marketed as the “Palm Loom,” where strips of wool were wrapped around the wheel and then stitched through. Below is a photograph of a “Palm Loom” and a rug shown in their advertisements.



—For awl shirring, the best know gadget marketed was the “Graftex Needle.” An illustration from their advertising is shown at the right.



A perusal of women’s or needlework magazines from 1910 through 1950 reveals that these and other rug making gadgets were quite well-promoted and apparently widely used. Today, however, very few of these tools are recognized unless they are still with their original instructions or packaging.

Gadgets may seem an amusing sidebar to the history of shirred and standing wool rugs, but they shouldn’t be dismissed lightly. Without the entrepreneurs marketing their wares, these varieties of rugs would have been forgotten as so many others have. For example, the simplest type of center sewn shirred rugs had pretty well disappeared by the 1920s because the technique only required a plain sewing needle (eliminating the opportunity to market a “special” tool for it). So the center-sewn shirred rugs vanished, while the more elaborate methods with “special “ tools survived in various forms.

CHAPTER 1

THE BASICS

Shirred and standing wool rugs are some of the most interesting and richly textured of the handmade rugs. The fabric is used sideways so that the edges are exposed, and packed solidly to give the rug both body and softness. There are also variations of standing wool rugs constructed to appear as if they are shirred. Those methods are called faux shirring. Finally, there are rugs that are made from a single piece of fabric gathered along many threads to form the rug. Following is a general guide to the main types.



Standing wool rugs are constructed by laying wool strips side-by-side and stitching them into solid unit. A standing wool rug does not have as much “springiness” as a shirred rug, especially when made of the traditional heavy woolens. Standing wool rugs can be very exciting visually, and this technique can be combined with other shirred methods to make exquisite rugs or hangings.



“Faux Shirring” is done by taking a strip of wool, tucking a fold and stitching it to the rug base. It is not true shirring since the fabric is not really gathered, it just looks like it has been. A rug made with faux shirring can be recognized because the folds of the fabric usually lay around the outside of the rug, instead of radiating from the center.



True shirring is where the fabric strip is gathered, and then attached to the rug. If the shirring stitches are placed in the center of the fabric strip, it is “center” shirring. If the stitches are placed near the edge of the fabric strip, it is known as “edge” shirring. True shirring can be done with a needle or various types of crochet hooks. Despite rumors to the contrary, there is no knitting technique that lends itself to making shirred rugs.