

NORWEGIAN BREAKFAST CLUB NEWSLETTER

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THE RUTEAKLAER TRADITION IN NORWAY

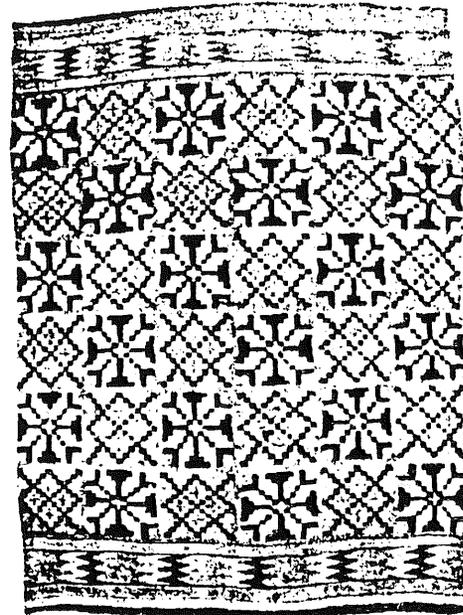
by Lila Nelson

Of the various types of coverlets produced and used on the farms in Norway during the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, those with geometric forms woven in certain tapestry techniques have been surprisingly neglected. Much more interest has been taken in the two major pile weaves, *flossa* and *rya*, and more is known of their history. This parallels the situation in the Orient, to which the *rya* knot can be traced, where pile woven carpets have until recently eclipsed concern with flat woven types. Marit Wang's *Ruteaklaer* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1983) is the first in-depth study of Norway's geometric patterned tapestry coverlets.

Like many folk textiles, the coverlets have been known by a variety of names, and recently scholars have tried to arrive at one generally accepted and understood term. *Aklaer*¹ has been in common usage to denote coverlets of which the geometric are only one example. In *Akleboka* (Gauslaa and Ostby, Landbruksforlaget, 1977) *aklaer* included twills, overshot, bound weaves, and double weaves in addition to the tapestry types.

Smettaklaer infers the technique; this refers to *aklaer* woven with small butterflies or bobbins with discontinuous wefts. *Ruteaklaer* identifies the design as being built up of square blocks (Janice Stewart in her FOLK ARTS OF NORWAY uses the term "square weave" in identifying geometric tapestry coverlets), while *Vestlandsaklaer* indicates the area in Norway where most of the coverlets were produced. Recently the Swedish term *rolakan* has been used in an effort to standardize nomenclature on a broader level (Nordisk Tekstilteknisk Terminologi by Stromberg, Geijer, Hald, and Hoffman, Oslo, published, 1974, and Wang, *Ruteaklaer*). However, since I believe that weavers in this area still generally identify *rolakan* with one specific type of tapestry coverlet from Sweden, I will use the term chosen by Wang for the title of her study, *ruteaklaer*.

When interlock tapestry, of which *ruteaklaer* is a type, came into Norway is not known. Archaeological finds in Sweden from the eighth and ninth centuries have included fragments of *rolakan* considered by some scholars to be indigenous. Anna-Maja Nylén states that it is generally believed *rolakan* existed in an unbroken tradition in Sweden from prehistoric times.² Janice Stewart equates the development of *ruteaklaer* with that of chip



Typical treatment of the 8 petal flower motif in the Hardanger area. Small lateral figures in white on a natural black background, alternating with the *hodnrose* (horned flower) in red, gold and black. The lightning borders are found all along the west coast.

carving in Norway,³ both appearing in the Middle Ages, although no examples from that period have been documented in any of the Nordic countries. Einar Lexow, in his 1914 study of the 280 *ruteaklaer* then in the Bergen Museum, speculated that the technique might have begun at a time when a sharp demarcation between rural and urban did not exist; that the eighteenth century marked the period of development among the Norwegian peasants and the nineteenth and twentieth centuries a time of gradual decadence and decline.⁴ The date of production for most extant *ruteaklaer* can only be surmised. Lexow dates one Sogn coverlet in the Bergen collection as no older than 1700 on the basis of the dress and pipe styles of two smoking figures in the upper center.⁵ Unfortunately, such figures are rare in *ruteaklaer* and, equally unfortunately, dates were seldom woven into them.

A little more is known about the locus of production. Of the 346 coverlets now in the Bergen Museum (the largest individual collection in Norway), the provenance of 205 is known. Practically all come from the west coast fjord area as far north as Sunnmøre and south to Mandal on the southern tip (see map, fig. 1). The highest concentration within that area is midway, in Sogn (49 *aklaer*) and Nordhordland (45), and in their bordering regions, Sunnfjord (23) to the north and Hardanger (19) to the south. Lexow's additional examination of *aklaer* in the collections of the Kristiania Museum of Industrial Arts, the Norwegian Folk Museum and the Maihaugen collection confirmed these conclusions. The few having inland provenances were believed to have been imports from west Norway.



Fig. 1 Areas of western and southern Norway where *ruteaklaer* were woven. (Numbers refer to the Bergen Museum collection as of 1975.)

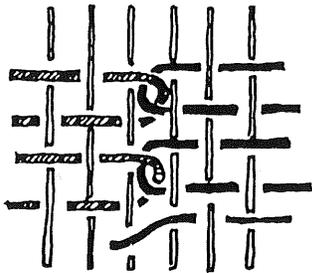
General characteristics of *ruteaklaer* include a rectangular shape around four feet in width and five feet in length. The majority are made in one piece, indicating the use of a wide loom; but in the southern areas many are woven in two equal sections joined down the center. The warp is generally of linen or hemp in the earliest pieces, but a tight twist cotton appears later. A small number throughout the west coast area have wool warps. The warp, generally single but sometimes double stranded, is spaced so that it is completely covered by the wool weft, which is packed down to produce a satisfactorily tight and warm coverlet. The occasional appearance of heading cords suggests that some *aklaer* were woven on a vertical loom; Marta Hoffmann has written about a west coast loom with both upper and lower beams, as well as the warp-weighted loom, which was in common use throughout the country long after the introduction of the horizontal loom on the European continent.⁶ Fringed upper and lower borders probably indicate revival pieces made for decorative use only; the early *aklaer* were simply turned under and firmly stitched. The designs making up the body of the pieces are built up in blocks of two, four or six warp widths, with four being the standard. Upper and lower borders are generally present in widely varying designs and sizes; four-sided borders seem to occur only in

pieces from the southern areas. The *ruteaklaer* which, unlike the above, have an all-over banded composition, appear to be unique to the area of Nordhorland.

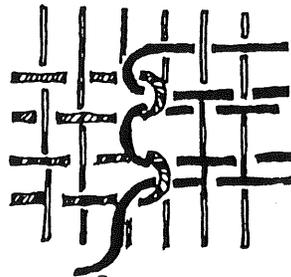
From the standpoint of tapestry techniques, the body of *ruteaklaer* were executed in four ways. Of these, the single interlock method seems to have predominated. In this method, meeting wefts are linked between warps when moving one direction only, fig.2. Double interlock, a linkage of wefts in both directions as in *rolakan*, fig.3, was a close second, although it appears that single interlock has been more common in late nineteenth and twentieth century coverlets. A considerably smaller group has single dovetailed joins (meeting wefts share a common warp), fig. 4, and a very few represent mixed techniques.

Of 345 *aklaer* in the Bergen collection, grouping according to technique was as follows:⁷

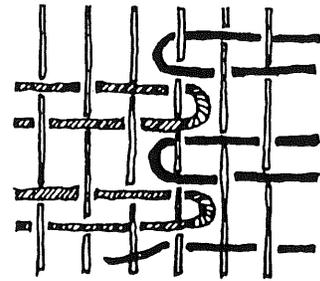
Technique	Number	Percentage
Single dovetailing	35	10.14%
Single interlock	156	45.21
Double interlock	143	41.44
Mixed techniques	10	2.89
Kilim (portion of)	1	0.28



Single Interlock
Fig 1



Double Interlock
Fig 2



Dovetail
Fig 3

Reasons for method choices are speculative. One could presume that a practical-minded housewife would prefer *aklaer* woven in single interlock because these were reversible. They were not, however, as heavy as double interlock pieces, a factor to consider in cold climates. Marit Monsen in the 1975 yearbook of Sunnmøre Museum, points up the possibility of a relationship between design and method. She noted that of the twelve *ruteaklaer* from Sunnmøre in the Bergen collection, the seven with eight-petaled flower motifs were done in single interlock; the four with diagonal line compositions were double interlock; and the one with both motifs included both techniques. Wang found that the eight-petaled flower "appears proportionately more frequently in coverlets woven with single interlocking".⁸

Professor Lexow from his 1914 study came to the conclusion that the wide variety of designs found in *ruteaklaer* developed from an originally uniform motif, the eight-petaled flower. He describes it quite explicitly:

The motif repeated in all coverlets of this older type is the eight-petaled flower with two dark colors alternating in adjoining petals. The space between the petals is yellow at top, bottom, and on both sides, and white in other spaces. Around the flower is always found an octagonal frame of a darker color. This figure is almost identical on these coverlets, with insignificant variations only in color. Four of the

(cont'd to pg. 6)

FOR THE LOOM

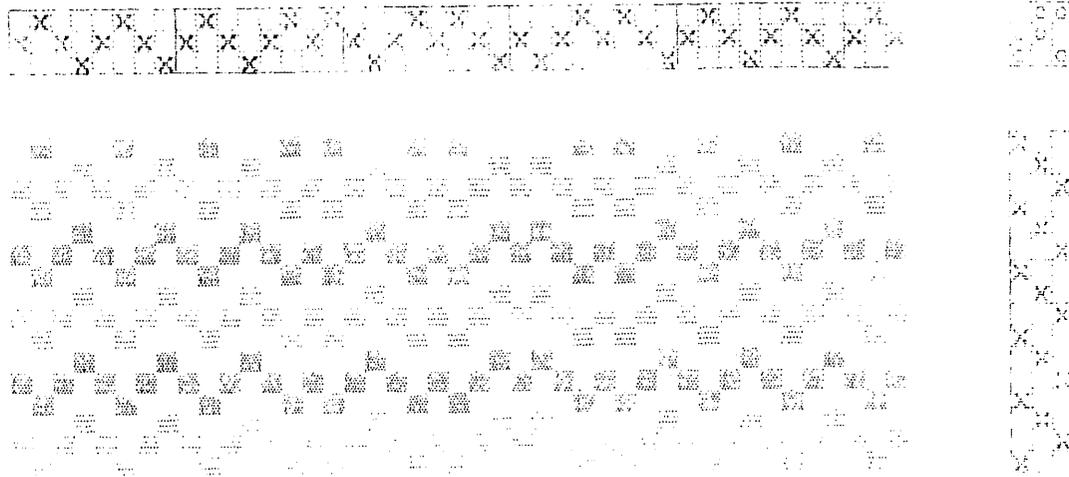
Many of our members expressed interest in receiving drafts and weaving information that they can translate to their looms. From time to time we will include drafts. Please send information you would like to share to Betty Johannesen or Lila Nelson.

COMBINATION KROKBRAGD

Ends 1-43

Picks 1 24

3 Shafts COLOR & WEAVE



Combination Krokbragd - In this threading, traditional single and double krokbragd appear in the same draft. The woven piece appears to have a compressed border with a more exaggerated pattern area in the center. When using more than two colors for a motif the appearance becomes quite linear. Any of the motifs found on pgs 23 & 24, *Akeboka* by Gauslaa and Astby can be threaded for both single and double krokbragd with pleasing results. I have not tried to expand the single motif examples on earlier pages in this book.

Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum

The reference library at Vesterheim has the usual assortment of weaving publications. We have general how-to books; pattern drafts for traditional and contemporary Norwegian, Swedish, Finnish, and Danish domestic linens; and scholarly research on Scandinavian textiles. One fine resource of that last type is By og Bygd, the yearbook of the Norsk Folkemuseum in Oslo, Norway. The journal includes articles on all aspects of Norwegian cultural artifacts from architecture and furniture to dress and textiles. Researchers such as Marta Hoffmann, Thor Kielland, and Aagot Noss have presented their findings in By og Bygd over the years. The Vesterheim library contains a fairly complete set of the journal from 1943 to 1988. Lila Nelson tells me that the University of Minnesota library also has a set. If the libraries in your area do not have By og Bygd, you may be able to obtain copies of articles through interlibrary loan or you may write to us for a photocopy. Please indicate which article(s) and whether or not you would like the copy to be double sided. We will send an invoice for the photocopies and postage - each page is \$.15. The list of articles here is a very select list. The remainder of textile articles will appear in future newsletters. But if you can't wait, drop me a line and I'll send you the complete list.

Laurann Figg, Curator of Textiles
Vesterheim Museum, 502 W. Water, Decorah, IA 52101
(319)382-9681 Fax (319)382-8828

Selected textile articles in By og Bygd - Yearbook of the Norsk Folkemuseum, Oslo

- 1943 Marta Hoffmann. *Rokk og spinning i tukt - og manufakturhusene*. Pp. 9-26. (Spinning wheels)
- 1945 Thor B. Kjelland. *Litt Norsk vevbotanikk*. Pp. 43-62. (Tapestries with floral motifs)
- Marta Hoffmann. *Om dymagere og tøyagere og redskapene deres*. Pp. 113-134. (Fabric manufacturing)
- 1961 Ernst Fischer. *Fyra flamskvavnader frå Hjørundfjord*. English summary. Pp. 1-20. (Four gobelin tapestry chair covers)
- 1962 Marta Hoffmann. *Frøken Kristiane Frisaks patenterede opstadvæv og andre billedvevstoler fra tiden før siste århunreskifte*. Pp. 123-132. (Kristiane Frisaks' patented vertical tapestry looms)
- Astrid Bugge. *Litt om transparente portierer*. Pp. 133-138. (Transparent tapestry and Frida Hansen)
- 1964-5 Ernst Fischer. *Nordska flamskvavnader i Nordiska Museet (Stockholm)*. German summary. Pp. 53-83. (Norwegian tapestry in the collection of Nordiska Museet)
- 1966 Astrid Bugge. *Ryene på Kjerringøy handelssted i Nordland*. Engl. summ. Pp. 77-80. (Ryas from Nordland)
- Aagot Noss. *Bandlaging*. Pp. 111-142. (Band making on: cards, rigid heddle, cradle loom, upright loom)
- 1967 Ernst Fischer. *Norden och orienten: Verklighet eller tillfällighet studier i flamskvävnamönster*. Pp. 89-112. Swedish. (Oriental motifs in Norwegian weavings)
- 1968-9 Ernst Fischer. *Från granatäpple till skybragd*. German summ. Pp. 101-118. ("From pomegranate to cloud weave")
- 1973 Marta Hoffmann. *En nordlansdsk rye fra 1681*. Pp. 9-16. (Rya from Nordland with a date of 1681 woven in)
- Ernst Fischer. *Från Hamburg till Gudbrandsdalen: Ett flamskvävnamönsters vandring*. Germ. summ. Pp. 51-62. (German impact on central Norwegian tapestry)
- 1977 Marta Hoffmann. *Greneveving i Manndalen: En levende tradisjon med røtter i forhistorisk tid*. Germ. summ. Pp. 123-140. (Sami grener on warp-weighted looms)
- 1978 Anne Kjellberg. *Brodert vevnad eller vevet broderi?* Pp. 69-90. (Whether a group of åklær were woven (skillbragd) or embroidered) English translation on file (6 pages)
- 1979-80 Inger Lise Christie. *Dåpslinder fra Østerdalen i en gruppe "kristenband" me innvevde årstall, gårdsnavn og initialer - kan dette fortelle noe om de tidligere eiere eller vevere?* Engl. summ. Pp. 115-149. (Swaddling bands from Østerdalen)
- 1983-4 Inger Lise Christie. *Brikkevevde bånd i Norge: Levande tradisjon og glemte teknikker*. Engl. summ. Pp. 55-94. (Complete discussion of the history of Norwegian card weaving)
- Elsa E. Gudjonsson. *Nogle bemærkninger om den islandske vægrvæv, refstadur*. Engl. summ. Pp. 116-128. (Icelandic warp-weighted looms)
- Mary Mikalsen. *Greneveving: En levende tradisjon i Manndalen*. Engl. summary. Pp. 179-184. (Marta Hoffmann's work in Troms with grene weavers)
- 1985-6 Anne Kjellberg. *Rutevevde tekstiler fra Vest Agder*. Engl. summ. Pp. 68-112. (Ruteåklær in Vest Agder)

petals are always of a reddish-violet color (from a vegetable dye made from *lecanora tartaria*). The other four petals are usually green or brown but now often faded completely gray; occasionally they are also blue. The frame is woven in the same colors as those of the flower. Yellow and white are the unchanging ground colors.

The same rule for color placement is adhered to here as in heraldry: 'either color on metal, or metal on color'; that is, darker colors must never be placed close to each other but must always be separated by light colors (gold and silver in heraldry, yellow and white in square weave)".⁹

Variation in the arrangement of the flowers occurred early and developed in some cases a clearly localized character. In Hardanger they became smaller than in Sogn and Sunnfjord and were repeated, often in white, up to 24 times, while broken-up diagonals with complex color and design arrangements dotted the divisions between the flowers. The colors were usually the standard red, yellow, and natural white and black, but in brighter shades than found to the north in Sogn, with sometimes blue or green included. Eventually the division blocks between petals as well as the alternating color arrangement disappeared, leaving a simplified form of an eight-pointed star. Generally speaking, the coverlets of Sogn and the north have big bold flowers in larger blocks of color than are usual in Hardanger and the south. In Nordhordland a distinctively horizontal orientation developed, with the eight-petaled flower only one of other motifs and techniques occurring in narrow bands across an entire piece. Relatively dark shades of red and blue also distinguished many of these coverlets.

The Celtic knot motif has been found often, though not exclusively, in Sogn. It is a motif to which magic properties were once ascribed, but it is not known that this or any other motif had symbolic significance as used in *aklaer*. While in some media the knot has circular loops in each of the four corners, in geometric weaving these have become squares. The knot has appeared within the center of an eight-pointed star, in a double form in horizontal rows, and in a highly complex structure of 20 interlocked knots rather than the standard four. In other variations the knots have been opened to form a motif called the nine crosses. In still another, referred to as the nine-flowers motif, the crosses have each become closed triangles. Finally, it has been combined with a variation of the lily cross in which the Celtic knot is practically obscured.

While crosses and diamonds fill the diagonals between flowers and knot motifs, they also comprise the only motif in some *aklaer*. Four diamonds clustered together to form a large diamond called a *hodnrose* (horned flower)



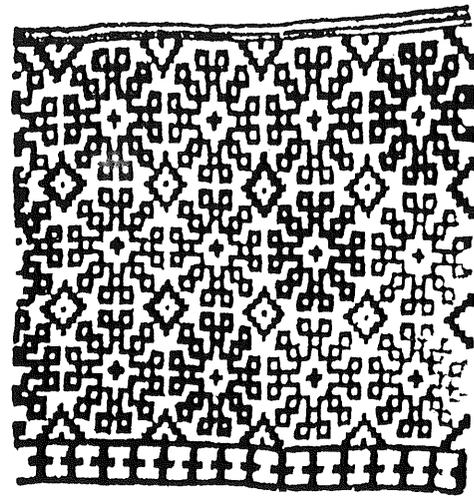
A variant of the Celtic knot from the Sogn area.

sometimes alternated with a five-diamond arrangement known as *kollerose* or hornless flower. These seem to appear in all of the west coast areas where *ruteaklaer* were found.

The ornamentation on upper and lower borders, which can be found in practically every *rutaklaer*, varies considerably in width, design, and technique. By far the most widely prevalent - and often the only - border designs are narrow stripes and two-color alternations called *kjerringtenner* (hag's teeth). All the colors of the piece are picked up and blended in what is usually a pleasing contrast to the bolder blocks of color and design in the body. Other borders, which occur in approximately decreasing frequency in the order of their listing, include:

- 1) Designs composed of hag's teeth and small overshoot areas. H's in which the crossbar is done in overshoot, the crab pattern, and a triangular repeat are the most common.
- 2) Rows of crosses or squares or rectangular blocks executed in the tapestry technique used in the body.
- 3) A lightning or zigzag pattern done in a variant of the slit or in one of the interlock weaves.
- 4) Triangles or similar geometric designs built up with wool wefts in inlay techniques.
- 5) Rows of shuttle weaves such as rosepath or one of the bound weaves.

This brief introduction points up how much is left to be studied about *ruteaklaer*. The extensive collections in Norwegian museums other than Bergen, as well as the many in private possession, need to be catalogued. Microscopic examination of warps to determine the nature of what Wang describes only as non-wool could answer questions about the introduction and distribution of cotton in rural Norway. The relationship of *ruteaklaer* to the pictorial tapestry tradition in Norway is a field of further exploration. Very little has been done to relate *ruteaklaer* to geometric flat weavings of Poland, Rumania, Bulgaria, and parts of western Europe. And of particular interest here, the number of *ruteaklaer* in private and public collections brought to this country as a result of the Norwegian immigration should be located and researched. They are a part of that complex and diverse entity which comprises the folk art tradition of America.



A highly complex variant of the Celtic knot from Sogn.

¹The spelling of *aklaer* varies according to chronology and place. *Aklede*, for example, is an early form.

²Anna-Maja Nylen. Tr. Anne Charlotte Harvey Swedish Handcrafts, New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1977, p. 151.

³Janice Stewart. The Folk Arts of Norway, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1972, Second edition p. 164.

⁴Einar Lexow. Tr. John Gundersen. Vestlandsk Vevkunst. Monograph reprinted from the Bergens Museums Aarbok, 1914. p. 27.

⁵Lexow, p. 7.

⁶Marta Hoffmann, En Gruppe Vevstoler pa Vestlandet, Oslo: pub, 1958; *ibid.*, The warp-weighted Loom. Studia Norwegica No 14, Oslo, 1964.

⁷Marit Wang, Ruteaklaer, Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1983, p. 147.

⁸Wang, p. 148, English summary.

⁹Lexow, pp. 5-6.

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COVERLET REGISTRATION

Mary Erickson and Carol Sperling have begun the registration of Norwegian coverlets in private collections in the north Minnesota region, the first coverlet surfacing unexpectedly at a meeting November 14th of the Duluth Fiber Handcrafters. A collector brought in a double interlock example with the traditional eight-petal flower motif in an unusual configuration with diamond motifs. Woven across one border were the initials GSD and the date 1841, information very rarely appearing in these coverlets. Also unusual was a row of Hs repeated in double interlock across the opposite border. These unique characteristics may make it possible to trace the history of this coverlet, particularly since GSD very likely indicates the female owner (the D referring to Datter or Daughter, the G to her name and the S to her father: for example, Gudrun Sigrid's Datter). An exciting beginning to Mary and Carol's project!

TO ALL NBC MEMBERS PLANNING TO ATTEND THE FRONTIERS FOR FIBRE CONFERENCE JULY 13-16, 1995, AT PRINCE GEORGE, BRITISH COLUMBIA

Shall we continue the tradition and meet for breakfast, on Saturday morning, July 15, if possible? I will try to arrange a time and place and get the word out to you. If I can't work out plans ahead of time, watch for the Messages Bulletin Board (there always is one somewhere) for details. Lila Nelson

NORWEGIAN FOLK ART; THE MIGRATION OF A TRADITION is the name of an exhibition opening this fall at the Mueum of American Folk Art in New York, in connection with the first official visit of King Harald V and Queen Sonja to this country. Co-sponsored by the Norwegian Folk Museum in Oslo, the exhibit will include over 200 objects used by immigrants in Norway or brought with them to America, as well as contemporary works reflecting a continuation of the migrating tradition. A catalogue will accompany the exhibit, edited by Marion Nelson, Director Emeritus of the Norwegian-American Museum and guest curator of the exhibition.

"NEPTUNE'S DAUGHTER", an exhibit of new work by Norwegian tapestry weaver, Grete Bodogaard, is traveling throughout the United States thru 1996. The exhibit had been on display since January 1994 at the Dahl Fine Art Center in Rapid City, South Dakota.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Sharon Marquardt - "I'm primarily interested in coverlet weaves, particularly krokbragd, rutevev and rosepath - any of the weave structures that look "primitive". I will be learning Vestfold tapestry. I own a double point antique coverlet which inspired all this along with my Norwegian ancestry. My goals are to weave many hangings, and eventually weave full-width coverlets".

Jan Mostrom - "I am interested in studying Norwegian traditional and folk weaves. I would be interested in old or new articles or books on Norwegian weave structures and designs. Having translations of these would be very helpful. I would be willing to help in anyway I may be helpful in making this information available to others".

Lynne Greaves - "I love the Scandanvian art weaves and have done several Skillbragds - one quite large. I've also done several rag rugs inspired by Vav only of wool strips rather than cotton. I have a 12-shaft Oxaback loom with the Opphamta attachment. I'd be very interested in locating someone who could translate a paragraph or two of Norwegian or Swedish. I have no problem with drafts, etc. But feel I miss a lot by not understanding the historical description. I'd be happy to pay for this service".

Jean Smelker - "Years ago I tried to join Lila's group, but as a busy pediatrician it just never worked out - their busy times were mine, also.

Now I am retired, I have focused my weaving interests entirely on tapestry - from Hannah Ryggen to Grete Bodegard and Ase Froysadal (and my own). I read Norwegian pretty well, speak some and understand 'Trondish' best!"

Ruth Duker - "My interests are in the Scandanavian art weaves: Krokbragd, Rollakan, Vestfold technique, Bound weaves, Dukagang, and Skillbragd and so on. I feel these weaves get short shift in books and magazines and would love to see these wonderfully colorful weaves perpetuated and brought out more to the public eye".

Norma Smayda - Norma learned to weave in Norway in 1967, and returned there to lead handweaving fours for five years and as an exchange teacher, 1981. She offers lectures and workshops in Scandianavian weaves.

Lila Nelson - "As most of you already know, I hope that our sharing of interests, information, expertise, and goals will help us all learn more about the Norwegian weaving tradition. From the positive response at our breakfast during Convergence, I feel we're already on our way. My personal goal right now is to develop a registry of woven bed covers in private ownership."

Linda Hendrickson - "I'm part Norwegian and crazy for cardweaving (brikkvev). My main interest is learning about historical and contemporary cardweaving of Norway. I plan to write up my findings for one of the weaving magazines, and would also like to teach the techniques to groups interested in Norwegian craft traditions. My other interest is krokbragd, a weft-faced technique used for rugs and bed covers. I'd like to add that my instruction book, *Tubular Cardwoven Neckpieces*, was puboished ealier this year by Robin & Russ Handweavers. I teach cardweaving workshops in the U.S. and Canada and have a small mail orderbusiness selling cardweaving supplies."

(Linda handles the publicity for the newsletter, thanks Linda for a great job!).