

# NORWEGIAN TEXTILE LETTER

Vol. XV No. 1

November 2008

## PICTORIAL SQUARE-WEAVING OR GEOMETRIC PICTURE-WEAVING? SCANDINAVIAN TRADITIONS COLLIDE

by Laurann Gilbertson

*Billedvev* (picture weave) and *rutevev* (square-weave) are two distinctly different weaving techniques used historically in Norway. *Billedvev* is characterized by the use of fairly detailed figures (humans, animals, plants) woven perpendicular to the warp. To create the design, the weft threads “travel back and forth in their own small area of the warp, and individual areas are built up at different rates” (Larson 2001, 58). The popularity of *billedvev*, which was woven primarily by specialists, peaked in Norway in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The weavings often had Biblical themes and took the form of either large coverlets (that could also be hung on the wall) or smaller cushion covers.

*Rutevev* is characterized by motifs, such as crosses, diamonds, knots, and eight-petal flowers, created from square blocks. The technique to weave *rutevev* is different from *billedvev* in that the weft yarns may change (start and stop) by color, but they are woven “one after another, across the entire width of the fabric” (Larson 2001, 85). Patterns are not built up by color sections; the patterns grow one row at a time. The squares may be two, four, or six warps wide and a similar number of wefts deep, though the actual number of wefts per block depends on the thickness of the yarn. *Rutevev* coverlets (and some cushion covers) were most commonly woven in farm homes on the west coast of Norway and in a few southern valleys (Setesdal, Gudbrandsdal, Hallingdal).

Although these weaving techniques and traditions are distinctly different, they have occasionally been combined. Detailed figures can be created parallel to the warp while weaving selvage to selvage in patterns built up from a series of small blocks or half blocks. Kay Larson includes one of these “pictorial *rutevev*” or “geometric *billedvev*” textiles in the picture weaving chapter of *The Woven Coverlets of Norway* (p. 55). The example is a coverlet from Sunnfjord on the west coast and dated 1898. There is a border of diamonds and eight-petal flowers as you would expect on a *rutevev* coverlet, but this textile also has a church, musicians, and people holding hands or candles.

Another “pictorial *rutevev*” or “geometric *billedvev*” from Sunnfjord is pictured in Marit Wang’s *Ruteåklær* (pl. 123). Two couples stand beneath a huge Tree of Life with clover-shaped leaves.

Both of these textiles from Sunnfjord seem to have wedding themes and are reminiscent of Swedish wedding coverlets, such as the one recently exhibited at Vesterheim (see Larson 2005, 55).

Swedish square weave, known as *rölakan*, more often includes figures like trees, lions, birds, and eagles, than does the Norwegian version of square-weave. Despite the differences in frequency, Anna-Maja Nylén sees enough similarity in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century patterns to suggest that both Swedish *rölakan* and Norwegian “pictorial square-weave” likely developed from the same initial impulse (Nylén 1977, 151).

Norwegian and Swedish traditions collided once again around the turn of the twentieth century when rural or “folk” culture inspired designers, weavers, teachers, business owners, museum directors, and the general public. Copies of old textiles and new interpretations were designed and woven. Norsk Husflidsforening (the Norwegian Handicraft Association) and Föreningen for Svensk Hemslöjd (Association for Swedish Handicrafts) linked artists and customers by selling hand-made textiles to interested buyers that lived locally or were visiting from abroad.

An example of one of the historical copies sold at Husfliden and Hemslöjd is the cushion cover at Vesterheim (LC 0937) below with a ring of birds framing a large Tree of Life.



Pillow top purchased in Norway or Sweden, ca. 1900. Wool on linen, 23.5" x 23". Vesterheim - LC 0937.

## PICTORIAL SQUARE-WEAVING OR GEOMETRIC PICTURE-WEAVING? continued

The design on page 1 was adapted from an eighteenth-century *rölsakan* coverlet from Skåne in southern Sweden. The design may have been “acquired” through the efforts of Lilli Zickerman, founder of the Association for Swedish Handicraft. Zickerman organized a huge collection of photographs and drawings of rural textiles for artisans to use. When possible, she even took small pieces of each color of yarn from the back of the textiles to ensure accurate reproductions (Lundahl 2001, 265).

Vesterheim has 14 “pictorial square-weave” textiles that date from about 1900 to 1940. Seven are cushion or pillow tops, four are probably wall hangings, one a portiere (door curtain), and two are table runners. Three were made in Sweden and 11 in Norway. If a location in Norway is noted, the places range from the Lofoten Islands and Narvik in the north to Eiken (near Kristiansand) in the south.

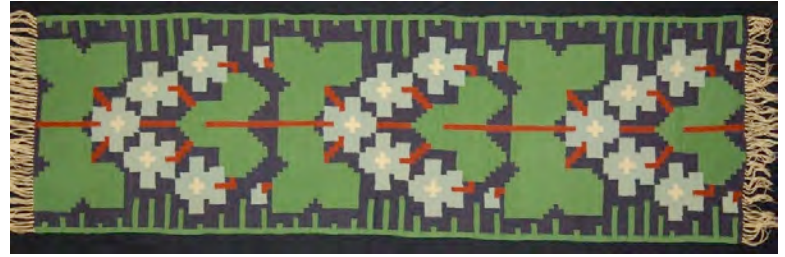
Several of Vesterheim’s examples of “pictorial square-weave” would fall under the category of nationalist or romantic. One pillow top has a *stabbur*, or storage house, on it. Another pillow top shows a Norwegian bride riding sidesaddle on a horse. And goats leap across the top of the door curtain below.



**Detail of a coverlet or portiere. Probably brought by Martha Nilsen Unstad in 1938 from Kabelvaag, Lofoten, to Alma, Michigan. Wool on cotton, 51.5" x 88". Vesterheim – 2008.005.002.**

The designers and/or weavers may have selected rutevev for their pictorial pieces because the geometric treatment added a folksy feeling to the piece. And the folksy feeling complimented their rural images, so popular with Norwegians and Americans. Norway was blossoming as an independent nation, international tourism was increasing, and ethnic heritage was celebrated.

The two textiles on the right feature more complicated floral designs. The table runner (1986.093.030) has three-lobed leaves and small blossoms. It is a simple, repeating pattern, but the leaf clusters and blossom clusters create a secondary pattern of chevrons. The runner uses stripes effectively for contrast and to fill space.



**Table runner woven by Sigrid Melloh, Hardanger, Norway, 1936. Wool on wool, 23.5" x 64.5". Vesterheim–1985.013.024.**

The most dramatic floral design is on the large wall hanging below (2002.049.004). Wisteria blossoms cascade from a delicate branch with sky and clouds in the background. The borders are butterflies and caterpillars. Although the textile was created in pictorial rutevev, the design is made up of much smaller blocks to allow for a more delicate and detailed image.



**Table runner that belonged to Mrs. Aalhus of Starkweather, North Dakota. Wool on cotton, 60" x 17". Vesterheim – 1986.093.030.**

Scandinavian weavers in the early twentieth century utilized traditional rutevev for pictorial textiles in both old and new ways. The folksy look that the geometric technique gave the designs appealed to locals as well as Americans and other international audiences. Handicraft associations linked weavers and buyers as everyone celebrated Scandinavian imagery, artistry, and rural traditions.

### Sources

- Kjellberg, Anne. “Textiles in ‘Rutevev’ from Vest- Agder,” *Norwegian Textile Letter* 7(4): 2001, pp. 1-8, 12-13.
- Larson, Katherine. *The Woven Coverlets of Norway* (Seattle: University of Washington, 2001).
- Larson, Katherine. “A Common Thread: Weaving Traditions of Norway and Sweden,” *Vesterheim* 3(2): 2005, pp. 50-58.
- Lundahl, Gunilla. *Karaktär och känsla: Ett sekel med Svensk Hemslöjd* (Stockholm: Raster Förlag, 2001).
- Nelson, Lila. “The Ruteaklaer Tradition in Norway,” *Norwegian Breakfast Club Newsletter* 1(2): 1995, pp. 1-3, 6-8.
- Nylén, Anna-Maja. *Swedish Handicraft*, transl. Anne-Charlotte Hanes Harvey (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1977).
- Wang, Marit. *Ruteäklær* (Bergen: Universitetsforlaget, 1983).



# NORWEGIAN TEXTILE ARTIST

## SISSEL BLYSTAD

by Ingebjørg Monsen

(Ingebjørg is a weaver and teacher and a resident of Bergen, Norway. She has taught at Vesterheim and was one of the intrepid guides on Vesterheim's 2005 and 2007 Textile Study Tours to Norway.)



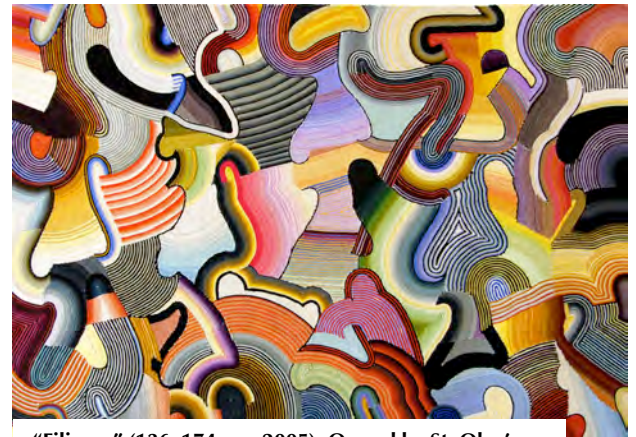
Sissel Blystad is regarded as one of our most important living textile artists. She was born at the end of the Second World War, 1944. As the daughter of a Norwegian painter, she regards her works with a pictorial view. Her textile expression is a form she uses to make her pieces unique. She is, and has been, continuously working to improve, change, experiment and challenge the limits of her means of expression.

Currently her work with the new wool-on-wool technique has become her form where tapestry weaving previously prevailed. Her use of vivid colors and the distinct form are supported by a skilled sense of composition.

In addition to commissions for numerous Norwegian institutions, many group and solo exhibitions in Norway and abroad, and prizes and grants for her extensive production, Blystad has been awarded an Artist's Guarantee wage by the Norwegian State.



Completed in 2005, Blystad wove the "Landscape" tapestries in billedvev technique. 380x1500 cm. Here, workers are installing two of the three large panels in the Rambler's Hall (Vandrehallen) in the Norwegian parliament building.



"Filigran" (136x174 cm. 2005). Owned by St. Olav's Hospital. Wool on wool, recycling of our old woolen blankets.

"Nips 1979" (80x80 cm)  
The framing part of the tapestry is made on a floor loom, with thick rya yarn dyed by Sissel, (as in all of her tapestries).  
The inner part is made in a small tapestry frame loom (Rammevev) woven in tapestry yarn. The apple in the center is woven in embroidery yarn. The tapestry yarn and embroidery yarn are made from the shiny guard wool of the Norwegian Spelsau sheep. The more wear and tear, the more shiny! Sissel is always experimenting to make her pieces special and cutting edge within a traditional technique.





# CELEBRATING WEAVING IN THE NORWEGIAN TRADITION

by Laurann Gilbertson

Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum's 27<sup>th</sup> annual Exhibition of Weaving in the Norwegian Tradition was held in Decorah, Iowa, on July 19-26, 2008. Weavers from around the United States sent traditional and contemporary interpretations of Norwegian weaves to wow the national (and international) audience.

In addition to the important exhibition and education functions, there is an element of competition. Three judges wrote constructive comments and awarded ribbons to the weavers. The judges this year were Robbie LaFleur, Gold Medal weaver from Minneapolis, MN; Ingebjørg Monsen, weaver from Morvik, Norway; and Anna Heineman, Instructor of Art at Luther College, Decorah, IA.

The ribbons went to:

**Sally Scott** Sioux Falls, SD

*Blue Ribbon* for a box-bed coverlet woven in four-harness rosepath

**Pamela Davis** Little Canada, MN

*White Ribbon* for a tapestry titled "Connect the Dots #4: Celts, Runes, Tree Rings & Chocolate" (for photo, see the May 2008 NTL)

**Claire Ehernberger** Schuyler, NE

*White Ribbon* for "Samtidig Krokbragd," a rug in three-shaft boundweave

**Jeanette Bauer** Iowa City, IA

*Honorable Mention* for "Scandinavian Rhythm," a wall hanging in boundweave on opposites

**Barbara Berg** Decorah, IA

*Honorable Mention* for an "All Seasons" clergy stole in Theo Moorman inlay technique.

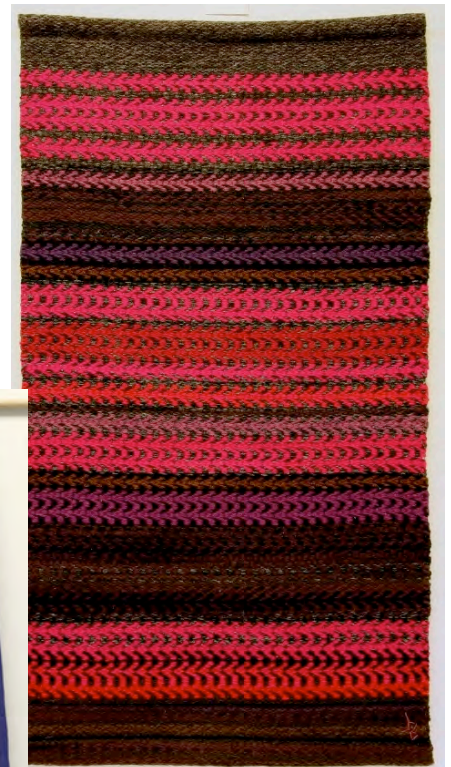
The *Best of Show Weaving* was "Almost a Forest" wall hanging in Vestfold technique woven by **Robbie LaFleur** (Gold Medalist), Minneapolis, MN (for photo, see the August 2008 NTL). Visitors to the exhibition voted for their favorite weaving to receive a *People's Choice* award. **Sally Scott's** coverlet won this honor.

As weavers win ribbons they accumulate points toward a Gold Medal. Blue Ribbon = 3 points, Red Ribbon = 2 points, White Ribbon = 1 point. After a weaver accumulates 8 points, he/she is awarded a Gold Medal. No medal in weaving was awarded in 2008.

Thanks, weavers, for participating. The official Rules & Guidelines for 2009 will be available by mail or internet in spring. Hope to see YOUR weaving next year!



Claire Ehernberger "Samtidig Krokbragd"



Jeanette Bauer  
"Scandinavian Rhythm"

Barbara Berg  
"All Seasons"



# DESIGNING AND WEAVING A PRIZE WINNING BOX BED COVERLET

by Sally Scott



I am a weaver with a tale to tell about designing and weaving a coverlet for **Harry and Barbara Davidson's box bed.** Their home in Minneapolis was a thoughtful blending of soft contemporary décor and folk art, reflecting

their Norwegian cultural heritage. They were making over a guest room "Nordic style" with the help of local artisans. Hans Sandom, a wood carver, and Judith Kjenstad, a rosemaler, had begun the work.

A mutual friend introduced me to Judy as I was in search of a Norwegian folk painter to paint my cradle loom. "She is one of the best," I was told. As we became better acquainted I began to understand much more about Norwegian folk art. I am attracted to its beauty and the meticulous craftsmanship that is involved. My primary art interests were watercolor and weaving useful and decorative textiles. After moving to Minneapolis in 1993 I concentrated on weaving, improving my skills and learning more about historical textiles, especially those from Norway. Through the 1990s and into the new century I attended many lectures, looked carefully at regional and national exhibitions, joined the Weavers Guild of Minnesota, participated in a Scandinavian weaving study group and the Danskbragd Study Group, attended the Norwegian Woven Textiles conferences, went to *Ars Textrina* meetings, and took weaving classes at the Vesterheim Museum. I also toured Norway with a band of jolly weavers and friends known as the Norwegian Breakfast Club, which became the Norwegian Textile Guild.

Judy introduced me to the Davidsons and we had a visit over coffee and sweets. Barbara asked what kind of weaving I did and whether she could see some of my work. I agreed and soon returned with several small weavings for them to touch and feel along with my portfolio of photos. They were interested and we agreed that I would design and weave a coverlet sample for them. They were pleased with the sample and commissioned me to weave a coverlet.



**Sally Scott's blue ribbon and People's Choice box bed coverlet woven in four-harness rosepath.**

The coverlet was woven with wool spun from the Norwegian Spaelsau sheep, the indigenous wild sheep. They wander the coastland hillsides and seem to flow over the hills and rock. I especially like the feel and smell of Rauma Spaelsaugarn. It is slightly hairy so it covers the warp yarns well and never looks skimpy or dull.

Using colored pencils allows me a quiet time to visualize my ideas on graph paper. I stylize flora and plant motifs and incorporate the imagery and symbolism into form. For this coverlet I used 4 shafts of my countermarch loom and a rosepath threading draft. I wove a wide coverlet. This takes more physical energy to slide back and forth on the bench for every shuttle throw and catch per row as opposed to weaving two narrower matching strips which then must be joined.

When the room was finished, the Davidsons had a celebration and tribute for all those involved in the project. It was an afternoon to remember.

This spring Barbara phoned me to see if I would be willing to have the coverlet shown at the Vesterheim 2008 National Exhibition of Folk Art in the Norwegian Tradition. I was happy that she had thought to include the coverlet and warmed to news that **it had won a Blue Ribbon and the People's Choice award.**



# NORWEGIAN TAPE LOOMS

by Grace Hatton

When we lived in Germany in the 70s, I loved to go to museums that showed the way people lived hundreds of years ago. We visited open air museums in Germany, Holland, Denmark and Sweden. Little rigid heddle looms hung on the walls of the houses or in museum displays. They were often chip-carved, embellished with cut-outs or dates or initials.

For nearly 30 years I've lived on a very tiny farm where we raise sheep. I've learned to spin and have done some weaving, and have never forgotten about those tiny looms. Some years back Fred, my husband, began restoring antique spinning wheels which led me to research them. I eventually found the wonderful Norwegian wheels (*rokk*) in the Norsk Folkemuseum collection.

(<http://www.norskfolkemuseum.no>) Also in the museum, I found the collection of about 300 rigid heddle looms (*båndgrind*), some of which had more than one set of holes.

There was one article online about these double hole rigid heddle looms and the bands woven on them:

(<http://fiberarts.org/design/articles/rigidheddle1.html>) and (<http://fiberarts.org/design/articles/rigidheddle2.html>), but the patterns recreated in the article weren't exactly like those of the old bands.

Fred made me a loom after one I particularly liked in the Norsk Folkemuseum and added an extra row of holes. Then I needed patterns which I found at the Yahoo group "*band\_snoddar*." The group's "official" language is Swedish, but the list mom, Louise, is generous and patient and reads and writes English. She has a wealth of pick-up patterns in the files and resource pages. There is also a wonderful German website created by Anneliese Blaese (<http://www.gewebte-baender.de>). It is a marvelous collection of traditional pick-up pattern band weaving from all of the countries around the Baltic Sea.

Not knowing anything different to do, I warped the woolen pattern yarn—which needs to be about two or three times as thick as the background yarns (cotton or linen—in the top set of holes and commenced weaving. It was quickly apparent that one had to be consistent in pushing down the pattern yarn that wasn't needed in that shed to the same side of the background yarn immediately below it. And I kept looking for more information on how these double hole looms were actually used.



**Fred Hatton's reproduction of a box tape loom**

In the meantime I learned that there is a loom called a *spaltegrind* in Swedish that has two sets of slots, some longer than others, made for a similar purpose as the double hole loom.

These looms are used as back strap looms to keep both hands free for pick-up patterns.

Some were used with the decorative "top" hanging down because they could tip sideways if the handsome top were too heavy.

## NORWEGIAN TAPE LOOMS, CONTINUED

Laurann Gilbertson, Textile Curator at Vesterheim, found me several articles in Norwegian about the double hole looms which can be traced back in Norway at least until 1740,\* but still there was little information on how to actually use them.

It turned out there were a couple of double hole looms in Vesterheim's collection and she sent me a photo of one of them. The photo showed a double hole tape loom warped with a pick-up pattern band on one side and chained warp on the other! The loom was warped with the red pattern yarn on top – although the moths had been busy with it – and each lower hole and slot was filled with background color or border yarns. Luckily the background was linen or other vegetable fiber.

Some of the tape looms in the Norsk Folkemuseum have three layers of holes. I would love to know how to use them! Some are 60 or more slots wide with about twice as many holes. These very wide double hole looms are made of reindeer horn by the Sami people who live in the far north of Scandinavia and are used for elaborate pick up pattern weaving for bands used in their traditional dress.

In general the Norwegian rigid heddle tape looms have more holes and slots than other European tape looms. Some Austrian tape looms have only six to ten holes and a similar number of slots. A Danish tape loom in the Frilandsmuseet in Copenhagen has 20 holes and a box tape loom in the Heimatmuseum in Feuchtwangen, Germany has 17 holes and 15 slots.

Fred reproduced an antique box tape loom he had seen in *Spinning Wheels and Accessories*, by Pennington and Taylor and added an extra set of holes to that loom as well. I still use a back strap with it to keep my hands free for picking up patterns.

I used "baroque" crochet cotton, about size 10, for the background warp and some approximately dk weight woolen yarn for the patterns. For the weft, I used number 8 perle

cotton or more of the baroque cotton. Using these yarns, my loom produces a tape about an inch or more wide.

Obviously, not all the pattern holes need to be used. Some bands I have woven have narrow borders that are warped – like the Vesterheim example – with a couple of colored linen or cotton yarns on each side.

In most cases the reverse of the pattern is as interesting as the "front" of the band. The tapes the looms produced would have been used instead of all the things we use today—hook and loop tape, elastic, zippers or other fasteners today– to fasten clothing and as decorative embellishment.



**A double hole tape loom made by Fred Hatton**

\* *Gamle bandgrinder med to og tre holrader* av Torbjørg Gauslaa (p.34) from *Nord-Østerdalen Årbok* 1985.

"Nord-Østerdals uka 1982" (p. 43) from *Nord-Østerdalen Årbok* 1985.

"Band med plukkmønster – eksempler på oppskrift" av Anne Grete Stuksrud (p. 39) from *Nord-Østerdalen Årbok* 1985.

See also [http://www.weavezine.com/fall2008/wz\\_fa08\\_GraceHatton.php](http://www.weavezine.com/fall2008/wz_fa08_GraceHatton.php)

# NEWS FROM VESTERHEIM

## CONFERENCE UPDATE

Two more Norwegian keynote speakers have been confirmed for the Conference on Norwegian Woven Textiles, scheduled for September 25-27, 2009, in Decorah, Iowa.

Inger Anne Utvåg, currently dean of the Faculty of Art, Design and Drama at Oslo University College, is a talented weaver. Many of her artworks are inspired by an historical discovery made thirty years ago. As a student, Inger Anne visited a tiny community north of Bodø, Norway, that had been an important trading post. There she found a large collection of *båtrya* or "boat rugs," woven coverlets with one side of knotted fringe. She first wove traditional-looking versions of the textiles then began to add vibrant colors and contrasting textures. She expresses symbols of coastal identity while rekindling the original weavers' vitality and creative zest. Norwegian Textile Guild member Janet Meany wrote about Inger Anne and her work in the Spring 2002 issue of *Shuttle, Spindle & Dyepot*.

Britt Solheim lives in Gjøvik, Norway, but teaches courses all over Norway and Scandinavia in the old technique of *skinnfell* making. A *skinnfell* is a coverlet made of sheep skins sewn together. The "fell" might have a woven coverlet sewn to the smooth side, or it might have designs printed on by hand with carved blocks. Using dye made from alder bark, Britt stamps on designs that might be geometric or naturalistic, simple or complex. At the conference she will talk about the products and processes involved with making sheep skin coverlets and about the tradition, which is both old and widespread in Norway. Britt will also teach two four-day classes.

Complete conference information will be mailed to Norwegian Textile Guild members in summer 2009. If you are interested in proposing a presentation or discussion session at the conference, please see the Call for Papers inserted into this newsletter or contact Laurann Gilbertson at Vesterheim for more information ([lgilbertson@vesterheim.org](mailto:lgilbertson@vesterheim.org) or 563-382-9681).

### COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE:

NTG member, Heather Torgenrud, will present a translation of an article on band weaving entitled: "Ein Tekstils katt i Nord-Østerdalen" [A Textile Treasure in Nord-Østerdalen] by Torbjørg Gauslaa, from the 1985 Yearbook for the Museum in Nord-Østerdalen.

And more.....

**From Syvilla Tweed Bolson**  
**512 Locust Road**  
**Decorah, IA 52101**

Raumagarn and Røros Tweed Spelsau  
for weaving, knitting, felting, embroidery.  
Prydvevgarn, Åklegarn, Ryagarn,  
Ullspissgarn, Brødergarn, 100 grams

50 Gram Nøster/ball in  
Finullgarn 2 tr  
Strikkegarn 3 tr  
Gammel Series 2 tr  
Vamsgarn 2 tr (excellent for felting!)  
Lamullgarn 2 tr  
Ragg 2 tr sock yarn

\*August 1, 2008 new price list.

Harrisville Designs /Merino wools  
for knitters, weavers, felters.  
Cones: Shetland, Highland, Designer  
New: Bulky Heathered wool  
for felting and knitting.  
Hand dyed wool rovings

Scoured black wool for spinning  
Pillow size bottens for hand rya  
Linen and cotton warps, all sizes

Equipment:  
Schacht products/weaving  
Swedish temples, damask shuttles, handcrafted  
pickups, stick shuttles, *spaltegrind*, clamps for  
band work

563/382/3711 [smtweed@mchsi.com](mailto:smtweed@mchsi.com)  
*Mail order/open by appointment.*

EDITOR:  
Mary Lønning Skoy  
7200 York Ave. South #120  
Edina MN 55435  
USA  
952-831-4512  
[maryskoy@hotmail.com](mailto:maryskoy@hotmail.com)