

NORWEGIAN TEXTILE LETTER

Vol. IV No. 4

August, 1998

COLOR IN TRADITIONAL NORWEGIAN FOLK COVERLETS

by Lila Nelson

With so little color in the everyday objects surrounding Norwegian farmers until well into the 1700s, one can imagine its special significance in clothing and household textiles. The average farm home -- with its windowless log structure, a dirt or plank floor, and its unpainted walls, soot-covered from the central open hearth -- was, excepting for textiles, almost totally colorless. The beauty of soft light from a protected roof opening was also absent during the long winter when the sun was almost a stranger. Even the daily diet of flat bread, fishes, and cheeses -- served on plain wood plates and eaten with bone or wood spoons -- added no color excepting for berries and greens in the brief summer interludes. In such circumstances it is hard to overestimate the importance of colorful textiles, especially on festive occasions. After advent of the corner fireplace diminished soot and pigments for painting became available, and after glass-covered windows provided light, textiles still continued to play an important decorative role and have continued to do so into modern times.

Colorful bed covers provided psychological as well as physical warmth in rural homes, and it is believed that they may have also served as wall hangings. Though extant coverlets have not shown evidence of being hung, this may have been more common earlier, existing bed covers date from the 18th century to the present. It is known that a tradition of hanging a "kristenteppe" (christening blanket) behind the master's bench still continues in the province of Valdres, the blanket in turn draped with linen runners edged in a four-strand plaiting called "firfletting". The same location was graced with a billedvev" (figurative tapestry) in prosperous farms of Gudbrandsdal in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Some generalizations can be made about the way colors were used in the coverlets, keeping in mind the significant variations among and even within various areas. One of the rather surprising facts is that the color palette was limited. A look at the examples of the geometrically patterned interlocked tapestry coverlets in general use along the west coast in the 17th to 19th centuries (and probably earlier) indicates that four or five colors, including white and black, were standard. In a study of 130 covers at the Bergen Museum in 1913, Professor Einar Lexow drew these conclusions about the earliest type known:

The motif repeated in all the coverlets of this older type is the eight petal 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 the 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 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).

Lexow goes on to note that the later considerable variations among these earlier coverlets were primarily in the treatment of the design rather than the color. In Hardanger, for example, the number of repeats of eight petal flowers are as many as 16 in one coverlet, while in Sogn four, five, or at most six repeats were common.

As variations of the eight petal flower motif and the inclusion of other motifs developed, colors also changed somewhat; but the range within one specific cover continued to be fairly restricted. A reddish-brown rather than reddish-violet made its appearance, particularly in Hardanger; and the eight petal flower turned into the solid color field of the eight pointed star with red or blue the most common colors for the entire star. Green made its appearance in some areas instead of, but never with, blue. A particularly dark appearance became characteristic of coverlets from the Nordhordland area, where a reddish-violet was combined with blue.

The color scheme which Lexow found to be, all in all, most common to western Norway was red, black, yellow, and white. In fact, he states early on in his article that when he will in future be referring to "western Norway colors", it is those four he has in mind.

Other types of coverlet weaving show the same tendency toward a restricted color palette. The christening blanket in the city of Voss (used also in the wedding ceremony there) is an overshot of small designs in red, yellow, green, and black on a linen ground. In Valdres the blanket continues to be woven in its traditional colors of red, yellow, green or blue, and black on a warp of bleached cotton and a weft of unbleached linen. Others I have seen are pink or red, black and yellow on a linen ground. A popular six harness overshot design traditional to Telemark includes the primaries on a linen ground with either a red or a strong indigo blue often predominant. Monk's belt in Valdres was often seen in dark shades of red against green; in Romsdal one could find it in black with mustard-gold and gray. Krokbragd (bound weave) sometimes had more variations in color, but often strong shades of few colors gave an impression of a broader palette in that weave.

This impression is also evident in the many pictures tapestries from the 1600s and into the 1700s, originating primarily in Gudbrandsdal. However, a closer look at these works reveals the same limitations in colors. They are rich in design and much outlining in a dark brown, but are usually in the primaries. The ever popular subject of the Nativity and Adoration of the Magi usually shows bright blue and red Norwegian fjord horses galloping across the textile in a grand unconcern for either history or reality.

The impression we have of color in traditional Norwegian textiles today is affected by the

Cont'd on pg 5

CONVERGENCE

NORWEGIAN BREAKFAST NUMBER THREE

Lila Nelson

At 7:00 a.m. in the Westin Peachtree Plaza Hotel of Atlanta, 53 people sat down over coffee to take part in the Norwegian Breakfast Club -- reviewing the past year and anticipating the next. We were happy to welcome six new members.

I will quote from my own notes on my presentation to the group:

Just a few words to identify the Norwegian Breakfast Club to new members and visitors. We organized at the 1994 Convergence in Minneapolis. The first meeting was at 7:00 a.m. and that has been our fate ever since, hence our name. Our general goal is to share and disseminate information on traditional Norwegian textiles and, in so doing, to help perpetuate those traditions. In May of 1997 we had 99 members. In May of this year, twelve of the 99 discontinued membership; but we made up those 12 and added 27 to make a present total of 126 members.

I think our energies have been focused on four areas. I only want to talk briefly about them now because we want you to discuss them in a little while. They are: 1) putting out a quarterly newsletter, 2) meeting at Convergences and occasional other times, 3) helping build a significant body of literature on traditional Norwegian textiles through the library and archives at Vesterheim, Norwegian-American Museum, Decorah, Iowa, and 4) arranging conferences and workshops dealing with our areas of interest.

I'd like to review briefly what has been going on in these four areas during the past year. 1) The

newsletter. I wish Betty and her husband Don were here to talk about it. They welcome the words of praise many of you have given, but they want and need your suggestions, criticism, and input. I think of special importance are the translations which have appeared in the newsletter and are now part of Vesterheim's library.

2) The Convergence Breakfasts. Our early ones were just one hour long; we managed to double that for this meeting. An ideal was suggested at Portland, to have just a social breakfast together and then another longer meeting time for serious discussion. I tried without success for that arrangement; time is in great demand at convergences. Perhaps we might discuss later the possibility of regional conference meetings, such as the very successful one at Prince George, British Columbia, where the northwest conference was held a few years ago. I believe it comes up in Montana next year.

3) Building a significant library and archives of information on traditional Norwegian textiles. Some of our translations have already been of specific benefit to researchers, and we hope that can continue. Major ones this past year (and these were all donated work) were *WEAVING FROM WEST NORWAY* by Emily Mohr, 1940, translated by Judit Backlund; *SQUARE WEAVE* by Einar Lexow 1914, (the first serious study of west Norway coverlets) translated by John Gundersen; and two major articles translated by Eva Douthit: *THE HEROD TAPESTRY OF 1613 FROM SJAK* by Roar Hauglid 1961 and *OLD TAPESTRIES - NEW INSPIRATIONS* by Elsa Halling 1972. Eva is working on others of major importance.

We need more. Oline Bredeli -- historian, artist, and teacher from north Norway -- has sent me two articles on Merakervev, the special double weave from Oline's area, and one on damask weaving in Romsdal, another of Oline's specialties.

We are also adding registrations of traditional Norwegian textiles which are in private ownership or in small historical museums. I've brought my more casual personal record so you can see something of what we are doing. The complete records and better photos are on file at Vesterheim. I must tell you that a most dramatic registration occurred just a month ago when NBC members Janet Meany and Sally Scott and I went to northwest Minnesota. We helped unroll an object which had been sewn into a burlap bag since around 1912. It ran the length of a farmyard and proved to be 108 continuous beautiful feet of a very well woven and well designed rag rug in excellent condition. It had been produced by a Norwegian-American weaver in Spring Grove MN for the dowry of her daughter, who never used it. And on the same trip we opened three large dowry trunks filled with coverlets woven, also in this country, on a loom being brought back into use today.

Finally, 4) workshops and conferences. The first NBC conference was held in October of last year, hosted by Vesterheim, with pre and post workshops and an impressive array of speakers, including two illustrious guests brought from Norway. One hundred and thirty-nine were in attendance. A major result of that conference was to make the Vesterheim Board of Directors aware of the importance of their textile and loom collections. For the first time in their history, they put into writing their plan to consider a location for better loom storage and a permanent place to set up the old looms to teach traditional techniques, which are gradually being ignored even in Norway.

At this point in the meeting, Kay Larson was introduced as the new (fourth) NBC coordinator, and she described the plans she has developed for a workshop in Norway in 1999. Her detailed report is under separate cover.

Members then reseated themselves at tables where certain subjects were discussed. Kay Larson chaired the large group which wanted to hear more about the workshop in Norway. Several people considered the newsletter, and they felt the suggestions coming forth at Portland's Convergence covered the subject well. The points made were, briefly, as follows: 1) The newsletter is important. It is currently doing a good job. 2) Some additions to consider are analyses of fabrics, phonetic pronunciations of Norwegian weaving terms, sharing of old patterns, defining what is Norwegian, and the inclusion of cultural as well as craft information.

Another table began plans to organize a tapestry study group with particular initial emphasis on billedvev techniques and their application to contemporary expression.

My thanks to Judit Backlund, Shirley Herrick, Janet Meany, Cindy Ruesink, and Mary Erickson for collecting monies, keeping records, taking photographs, and hostessing. Thanks to other members who helped informally and to everyone who by their presence made the third Norwegian Breakfast a success.

NOTE FROM LILA

Lila is annoyed with herself for having misplaced the name and address of the NBC member who kindly offered to do some translating when time is available. Will she please accept my apologies and drop me a card. I will be happy to send her one of Oline Bredeli's articles with the understanding--that there is no deadline.

Colors in Traditional Norwegian Coverlets

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inevitable fading that has occurred through time and by actual changes sometimes resulting from unstable dye jobs. Until the last half of the 19th century, when synthetic dyes were introduced, much of the dyeing utilized available lichens, barks, roots, and blossoms together with imports, when affordable, of indigo, madder, and cochineal. Although many old coverlets have retained an almost suspicious brightness, others have faded in ways which make the identification of an original color problematic. A present-day neutral gray sometimes was originally a dark blue, deep green, or even gold.

In most areas, the red, blue, yellow, white and black were in harmonious shades or were placed in harmonious relationship to each other. The black was actually the warm reddish-brown of the dark spelsau sheep, and the white saw natural wool. The yellow was a mustard-gold shade while red varied from the possibilities of madder and cochineal to an iron oxide red obtainable from local plants. Generally speaking, the results were probably aesthetically satisfying, although Professor Lexow was critical of early juxtaposition of reddish-violet and yellow.

TEXTILES OF SEAFARING

Prepared by Lila Nelson from information provided by Amy Lightfoot

Textiles of Seafaring" is the very apt name for the project of Amy Lightfoot about which we have been keeping you informed and which has recently been generously funded. Amy has now provided a more in-depth description of the highly complex study in which her activities are an important part. She has actually sent us the entire contents of her European Commission fund application together with a summary for

the Textile Newsletter. I draw freely from both the summary and parts of the application; the report itself will be filed in Vesterheim's archives.

Textiles of Seafaring aims at increasing awareness of an almost forgotten part of Europe's cultural heritage: the craftsmanship behind woolen textiles used in seafaring. Preservation of this heritage requires a multidisciplinary approach.

Seemingly coarse wool textiles such as sails, sailors' clothing and bedding, tarpaulin and packing materials actually demanded a sophisticated knowledge of raw materials and technology. Survival in the cold waters of the Atlantic necessitated water-resistant cloth with specific and different properties for each type of item. For example, selecting the right wool for a sail is not simply restricted to the choice of sheep. The pasture where the sheep grazes affects the quality of the wool, as does the time and method of harvesting, sorting and cleaning. Spinning, weaving, and finishing methods each have an important impact on the final result.

This is mainly the women's craft, and the proposal thus relates to the very male-biased general image of this part of the cultural heritage.

Two main concerns highlight the central theme of the proposal: the textiles for seafaring (produced to be used on board) and the textiles from seafaring (brought by ship to the port of destination). Reconstructing the craftsmanship behind both groups will illuminate the sophistication of the work behind each.

Textiles of Seafaring involves an interdisciplinary cooperation among professional academic environments in European museums, students involved in investigating archaeological and ethnographic textiles, and

professional craftsmen and bearers of traditional craft knowledge. Three main enterprises will be undertaken: reconstruction of a woolen sail for an ocean-going Viking ship together with further equipment such as sailors' blankets and clothing; analysis and reconstruction work on selected samples of medieval textiles to establish a contrast to those used for seafaring and thus facilitate the scientific testing of reconstructed textiles; and the utilization of new technology to analyze fleece types from historical and modern archives.

The coordinating organization for Textiles of Seafaring is the Viking Ship Museum in Roskilde, Denmark's museum for ships and shipping from ancient and medieval times. Other participating institutions are the Museum of Natural History and Archaeology, Trondheim, Norway; the National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh; Alvsborgs Lansmuseum/Lodose Museum, Sweden; and the University of Manchester (England) Institute of Science and Technology.

Each organization can provide its own needed expertise. For example, the production of sailors' clothing requires advance research on early fleece types, yarns, and fabrics. At UMIST (University of Manchester Institute) Dr. W. D. Cooke and his colleague at the Manchester Ancient Textile Unit, Dr. John Peter Wild, have the equipment for such research; and research student Carol Christiansen with prior work on Shetland, who is preparing a thesis on early Norse methods of textile production, can perform the analysis needed to reconstruct sailors' underwear.

At the Alvsborg Lansmuseum, Boras, Sweden, Lena Hammarlund has been reconstructing Swedish pile rugs and blankets; she has also studied the craftsmanship of Roman textiles from Egypt. Her findings, together with the study and production of pile structures for

sailors' blankets by Amy Lightfoot, will help in their testing for water repellency in actual trial sailings.

Advanced techniques for the characterization of fleece types, fibers, yarns and fabrics have been developed by the Manchester Ancient Textile Unit over the past five years. These are based on Scanning Electron Microscopy coupled with Image Analysis, making it possible to measure fibre diameter and twist non-destructively. High resolution photography permits the measurement of fabric parameters without moving the object. The measurement of fiber thickness allows the estimation of a textile's bending and stiffness properties. The identification of a "spinner's fingerprint" is among early results of the work of Manchester Ancient Textile Unit directors Cooke and Wild. A comparison of fibers, yarns and fabrics can be made of material from Stiklestad, Heroy and Trondenes in the Trondheim collection with that from the National Museum of Scotland and the Scottish material in Trondheim and Lodose. The results are expected to provide important additions to the knowledge of wool properties and craftsmanship.

An important quality of Textiles of Seafaring is its potential for raising the level of public awareness by making the many comprehensive textile collections come alive. The processes involved in analysis, reconstruction and testing of textiles will be presented to the general public as well as students and specialists through a wide range of media. Exhibitions, films, educational activities, talks, conferences, and publications are planned. Main events will be a major exhibition at the Viking Ship Museum in Roskilde, Denmark, in 1999 and the Seventh North European Symposium for Archaeological Textiles at the National Museum of Scotland the same year. Two seminars are

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Mystery Coverlet

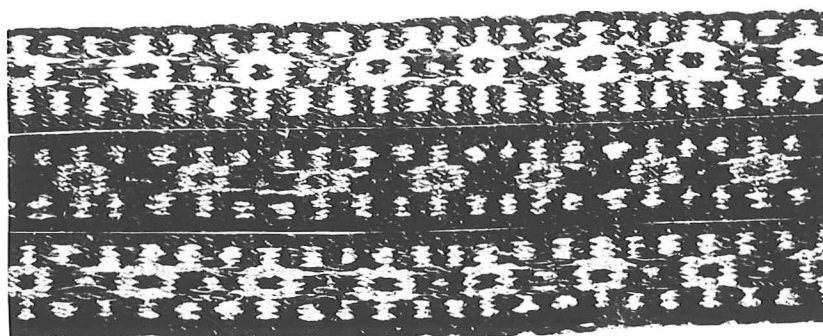
Laurann Gilbertson and Syvilla Tweed Bolson
Decorah, Iowa

If you have been following the mystery coverlet, you will have three of the coverlet's six different pattern bands. In this installment we offer "C," the fourth pattern band. Pattern "C" has a design that looks like crabs, *krabberender*, but, under closer examination, is something a little different. This pattern band of three parts in sequence appears four times on the coverlet. Follow the directions and drawdown carefully, because the motifs shift within the band.

Pattern

Band number

	heading cord
X	1
B	2
V	3
C	4
T	5
C	6
V	7
C	8
T	9
C	10
V	11
S	12



X - Xs

B - Boundweave / *krokbragd*

V - *Vestfold* technique

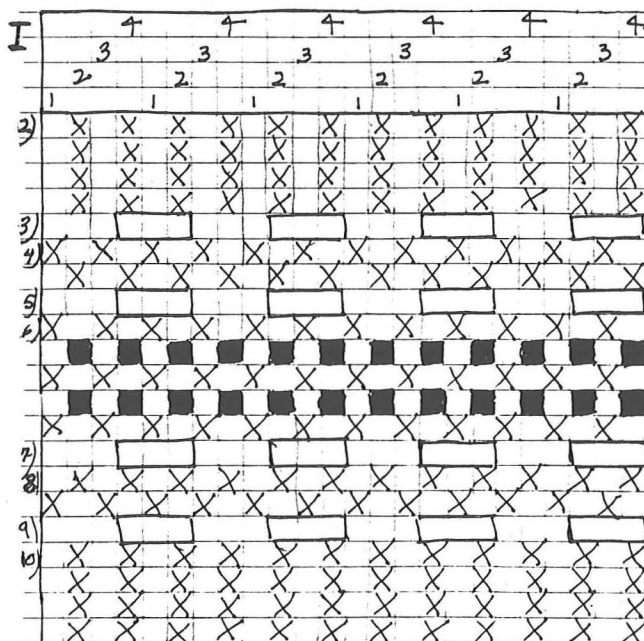
C - Crabs

T - Old Lady's Teeth / *kjerringtenner*

S - Stripes

Instructions: Pattern C - Crabs

Band #4, 6, 8, 10, originally 3 1/2" tall

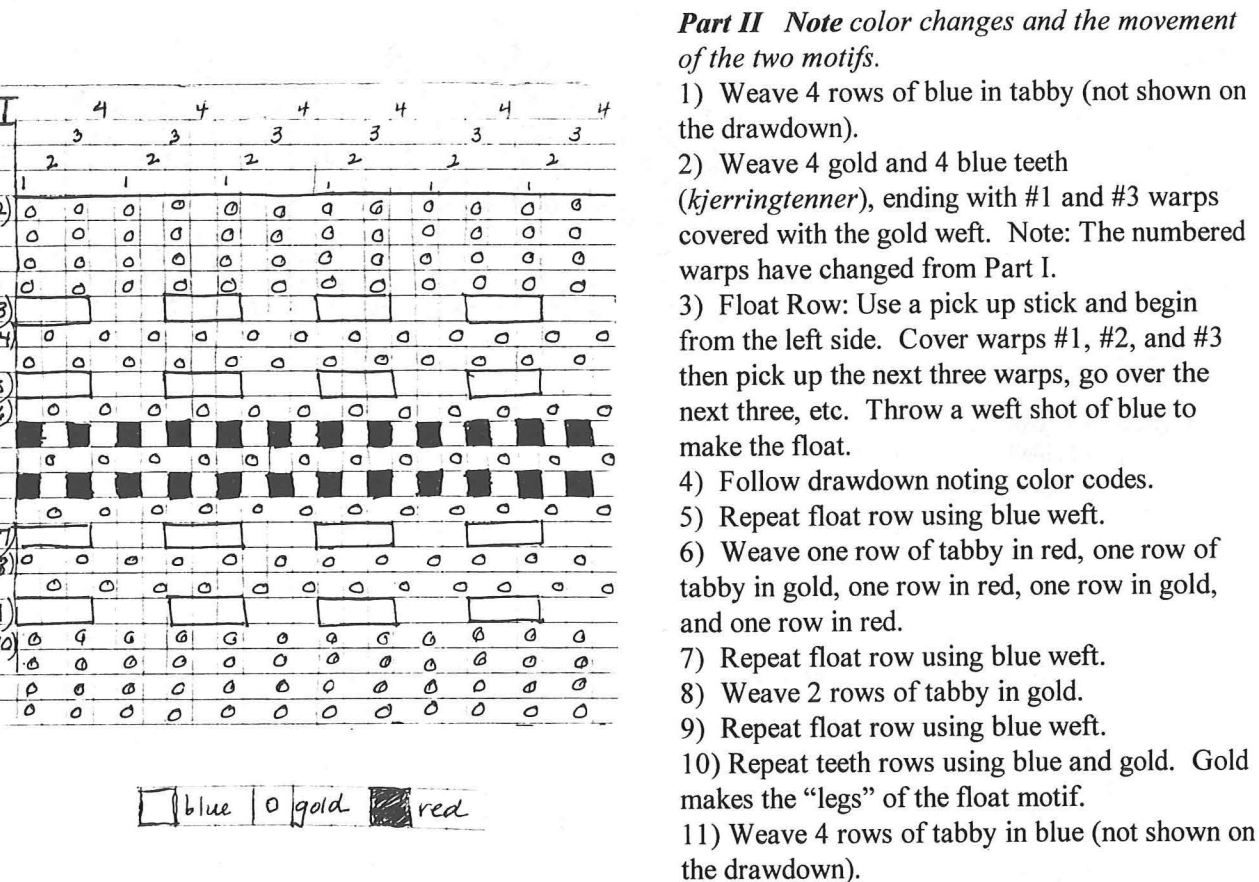


Part I

- 1) Weave 4 rows of red in tabby (not shown on the drawdown).
- 2) Weave 4 red and 4 gray teeth (*kjerringtenner*), ending with #2 and #4 warps covered with the gray. These warps are the "legs" of the float motif.
- 3) Float Row: Use a pick up stick and begin from the left side. Lift the first three warps, go over the next three, etc. Throw a weft shot of red to make the float.

X gray □ red ■ blue

- 4) Follow with 2 shots of gray in tabby as in drawdown above.
- 5) Repeat float row using red weft.
- 6) Weave one row of tabby in gray, one row of tabby in blue, one row in gray, one row in blue, and one row in gray.
- 7) Repeat float row using red weft.
- 8) Weave 2 rows of tabby in gray.
- 9) Repeat float row using red weft.
- 10) Repeat teeth rows using gray and red. Gray makes the “legs” of the float motif.
- 11) Weave 4 rows of tabby in red (not shown on drawdown).



Next Time In the next newsletter, you will receive the drawdown and instructions for Pattern “T,” which is a lively arrangement of “teeth” or *kjerringtenner*.

NBC MEMBERS EXAMINE OLD LOOMS

I would like to report on two activities which made June a memorable month, one occurring at its beginning and one giving it a grand conclusion.

From June first to third, NBC members Sally Scott and Janet Meany joined me in a non-stop investigative tour of early looms and Norwegian textiles in and around the towns of Shevlin, Fosston, Winger, Gary, Ada, Flom, and Ulen in northwest Minnesota.

The looms were not all Norwegian in origin or connection, but they helped underscore our belief that more home weaving went on in this country (in addition to rag rug production) during the latter 19th and early 20th centuries than has been previously recognized. Among the various looms we examined, Janet was able to identify a Union loom outside of Gary, a rigid heddle arrangement with vertical warp action in production from the 1890s to the 1960s; and we all helped assemble a monumental blue-painted and well-constructed counterbalance loom in the collection of the Norman County Historical Museum at Ada. Information on its history will be sought; its style is that of looms from both Norway and Sweden. A brief check was also made enroute back to Minneapolis at the Todd County Historical Museum in Long Prairie (my home town, incidentally), where a well-documented Norwegian-American loom is being readied for future demonstrations.

The loom of Arvid Strand, Ulen, belonged to his grandmother Thea, who immigrated from Norway in 1885, possibly bringing her loom with her together with a fine skillbragd coverlet. The remainder of her weaving filled three large dowry trunks: striped and plaid blankets, rag rugs, and overshot coverlets, their warp of standard "rug warp" cotton indicating

production in this country. Arvid has been aided by weaver Jeanine Ehnert in renovating and learning to weave on his grandmother's loom. Cooperation and unstinted effort on the part of a number of helpers made it possible for us to register the approximately 30 objects in the Strand collection in one afternoon.

A dramatic event was aptly named "The Grand Opening" by Janet Meany. Eighty-three year-old Minerva Christofferson decided it was time to release an object from the burlap sack into which it had been sewn in the early 1900s. Woven as a dowry item for Minerva's mother Caroline Jacobson by Caroline's mother Marion Olerud in Spring Grove, MN between 1895 and 1900, it was never used or examined. On June 1, a sunny spring morning, our helper Rev. Bob Paulson carried the 55 pound cylinder into the farmyard of his mother Elnora Paulson, cut the burlap bag, and then slowly unrolled its contents across the lawn. It ended just short of the road, a 108 foot well-woven rag rug (34 inches wide), in excellent and unfaded condition, with a continuous repeated striped pattern and in all its details revealing the work of a meticulous and skilled weaver.

June ended with a second impressive weaving event, the Ars Textrina conference held on the University campus at Madison, WI June 26-28. Nearly 80 registrants from such diverse places as Peru, Guam, Canada, England, Mexico, Bulgaria, and New Zealand, as well as across the United States, listened to nearly non-stop lectures by some 40 plus presenters. I cannot begin to express the breadth of subject matter at these Ars Textrina conferences, but you can begin to realize it by looking at the publications that follow each conference, this one its sixteenth. Topics that related rather directly to NBC interests were Larry Schmidt's explanation of his attempt to annotate nålbinding in a practical and understandable way, Laurann Gilbertson and Kathie Stokker's presentation

"Weaving Bewitchment: Munthe's Norwegian Folk-Tale Tapestries", Darla Thorland's "Sampling the Fiber Arts of Norway During a Study Abroad Year", and my own "Diversity in the Coverlet Tradition of Rural Norway". Chaired by our NBC member Pat Hilts and her husband Victor, they continued the high standards set by previous Ars Textrina conferences.

by Lila Nelson

Textiles of Seafaring

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planned: one at Trondheim focusing on resources, landscape, and wool farming strategies; the other at the Roskilde Viking Ship Museum connected with test sailings of the ocean-going Viking ship. Square-sail festivals with traditional boats and full-scale replicas are also being considered.

NANCY JACKSON TO TEACH NORWEGIAN TAPESTRY METHODS

From Nancy Jackson "The *Golden Gate Weavers* of Berkeley, CA have given me a \$350 grant to help toward my intent to develop curriculum for teaching small groups traditional Norwegian tapestry methods. I will use this curriculum to teach these methods from my studio. I intend to focus attention particularly on the Norwegian methods of outlining, which were taken to such extraordinarily creative levels, but hope to look at many technical approaches that Norwegians used to express themselves. I am hoping I will also be able to direct some attention to the structure of the image itself, the flattened space and its similarity to 20th Century flattened space and the reciprocal relationships between positive and negative space used so frequently. I had planned to do this work without the grant, but it is always good to have help".

TRAVEL IN NORWAY

Of interest to future travelers to Norway is the following announcement in the April issue of "Norway Travel News":

Concurrently, with the inauguration of Oslo's new International Airport next year [1999], Norwegian State Railways will introduce the next generations high-tech trains, putting Norway on the fast track towards the 21st century. The Airport Shuttle will move passengers from the airport to Oslo city center in just 19 minutes. The high-speed shuttle will run every 10 minutes, providing travelers with an expedient and reliable transfer between the airport, city center and various locations in the metropolitan area. In the next two years Norwegian State Railways will also introduce the high-speed Swedish X 2000 trains on all its main routes including the Bergen Line, the Dovre Line and the Southern Line.

GREETINGS FROM NORWAY

My husband, Marlin, and I spent time while visiting Norway in July with three professional weavers who have taught in Vesterheim's weaving classes. Marit Anny Tvenge of Lomen, Valdres; Anne Holden of Røn, Valdres; and Åse Frøysadal of Hundorp, Gudbrandsdal expressed their good wishes and greetings to weaving counterparts and friends in the United States.

Each woman named above is carrying on the traditional techniques in weaving in their own respective areas of their country. Marit Anny Tvenge has her studio, Marit Annys Vevstogo, with 20 looms, retail shop, and café in an old schoolhouse near Lomen in the Vest Slidre kommune. She weaves skilibragd including Valdres kristentepper, Flensvev, and much

liturgical weaving within the Valdres tradition. Some of the weaving is done by students, new and old. Marit Anny uses mostly Raumagarn wool which was a special interest to me.

Anne Holden specializes in bunad material of the Valdres patterns and in skillbragd including the Valdres kristentepper. She teaches in her home studio at Holden Gard through an art association. She, also, uses Raumagarn exclusively. Presently, she is setting up a school, VEVLÅVE, on the farm. There will be more information concerning her school in the next newsletter. Åse is not weaving commissions at the time being as she has in the past. She wants to be "free" as she explained it to me. She weaves a lot of bound weave and billedvev plus some computerized weaving and is using traditional patterns and motifs of her area. She purchases only natural color wool and does her own dyeing. (she uses a lot of Raumagarn). Her professional woven figurative tapestries are one of Norway's rich treasures.

Special times were spent with each of these artists and also at the Kunstindustrimuseet in Oslo where we saw the original Baldishol tapestry and many other 17th century tapestries.

by Syvilla Tweed Bolson

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