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NÅLBOUND RAG RUGS

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BY LARRY SCHMITT

When a friend from Edmonton, Alberta heard that I was to speak about nålbound rugs she emailed some advice: "... mittens, hats, and socks are worthwhile ... rugs not so much. I have made a few 'toothbrush handle' rugs in my time; however, unless one has access to loads and loads of free rags and way too much free time on his/her hands, rag rugs are not worth the effort." That's pretty much what I plan to say, and to be honest, I don't like to make nålbound rugs. Still I think it is important to discuss them and to know something about how they are made. There's no doubt in my mind that the rugs are a "traditional craft," reflecting a period in our history.



Toothbrush handle rug nålbound by Larry Schmitt.

I have learned that whenever I say something about nålbinding, it is a good idea to say something about the notion of traditional craft in America. To this day the effort to encourage craft among the underprivileged as a training tool, as a means to teach morality and propriety, and/or as a foundation for economic development is a dominant image of traditional craft in America, but I think \ another vision of traditional craft fits better for discussion of nålbound rugs.

Starting with the Erie Canal and moving westward through the Great Lakes, and then by rail from Chicago, Milwaukee, Duluth, and the Twin Cities, people bringing their own traditions encountered and survived "gales of

creative destruction" – to borrow a phrase from the world of economics. The new American culture was creating and recreating itself many times over. Our ancestors adjusted year by year to change in a new world, and their crafts were shaped by changing needs and by available tools and materials. We are descendants of a craft heritage sometimes called the "suburban," – in acknowledgement that we as craftspeople accept and rely on proximity to urban lines of supply and distribution as much as we depend on local materials.

I learned something about Nålbinding and nålbound rugs from my parents, and for something like thirty years I have been studying and teaching Nålbinding. When you learn something from your parents, you feel that they really didn't teach you much – often they won't take time to answer your questions. But later on you realize they taught you a lot – not only what they knew but what they learned from their parents and teachers. What you learn is the knowledge of three generations or more, and that counts for a lot.

My parents introduced me to nålbound rugs. They did not force them on me, but eventually I became interested in nålbinding's technique and origin. In Scandinavia, there were nålbound multipurpose items that were used as horse blankets, bed, wall, and floor coverings, and they were worked in wool or hair yarns. But in North America we find rag rugs with a nålbound structure. These rugs are an American tradition, and perhaps it's better to say, an American pioneer tradition. The rugs tend to be found in the upper Midwest the plains states and also reaching into Canada well into the northern reaches of Alberta.

I don't know whether my parents learned anything about nålbinding from their parents or grandparents, but both of them studied textiles from a teacher whose training reflects the strong craft traditions also seen in the work of Hull House. During the Great Depression artists' studios were established in Milwaukee, Wisconsin by the Works Progress Administration.

My father was the lead weaver and supervisor of the Weaving Studio.



Some of the weavers in the WPA Weaving Studio.

There were 100 looms in his studio, and 150 welfare recipients created mostly drapery fabric and rugs that were

sold to governmental units. Overall the average age of welfare recipients at the time was 40. Some of the weavers were disabled. At times, depending on work flows, **some workers in the studio created Swedish toothbrush rugs.** As a child I can remember when my parents identified the output of WPA weaving studio at schools, hospitals, and government buildings. I don't recall any instances where we encountered any of the toothbrush rugs. It is a pleasure

to learn that a sizable collection of textiles from my father's studio are in the collections of the Minnesota Discovery Center.

My mother made a large toothbrush rug at that time.

In the photograph, the rug is three or four years old and in the process of being enlarged because it was moved

from a dining area to a bedroom. The bars incorporated in the design of the rug are not typical. They were inspired by basketry from New Mexico. The rug is now in the textile collection of Vesterheim in Decorah, Iowa.

The fact that they are called "Swedish toothbrush rugs" suggests Scandinavian origins, with "toothbrush"

indicating that the needle used to make the rugs was made out of a toothbrush handle. Some years ago Lila Nelson ("Toothbrush Rugs," *Weaver's Journal*, Fall 1987, pp.16-20) tried to find definitive evidence linking these American rugs to Scandinavia, and even today I wonder whether we will ever

find hard evidence. Swedish toothbrush rugs have many variants.

The rugs can be confused with crocheted rag rugs. The rug's edge is the first place to look for a clue to the manner of construction. A nålbound rug will have a coiled appearance similar to a plied yarn while a

crocheted rug has a chained edge. In the rugs I have encountered, I have observed four variants more often than



Left—sample of Oslo stitch variant.

Right—sample of Dakota stitch variant.



others. One is a blanket stitch rug, with blanket stitches worked around a core.

Two variants utilize "Oslo" stitch, a stitch often seen in Scandinavian nålbinding. The variation between the two occurs where and how a new round of stitches connects to the prior round. A fourth variant, now called "Dakota" stitch because of its prevalence in the Dakotas, is



an asymmetric fabric, ridged on one side and flat on the other, a structurally similar to a nålbound milk strainer from Sweden and also to the **legendary Åsle mitten (left)** found in a peat bog in Sweden in the early part of the 20th century – suggesting but not confirming a connection between Swedish toothbrush rugs and Scandinavian nålbinding.

Nålbinding is a looped structure fabric that does not unravel. It requires finite lengths and a needle. The framework of the loop is essentially a blanket stitch, but each stitch may connect to one or more previous loops and in connecting to the previous round also to one or more loops.

Nålbinding is an old term that has been brought back to life. Sometimes in the English speaking world, the terms "needle looping technique" and "knotless netting" were used. Many other terms for the technique can be found in other parts of the world. Even in Scandinavia there was little agreement on terminology until 50-60 years ago when the term "nålbinding" was revived. Today it may seem odd to hear nålbinding used in reference to

items originating in other parts of the world. Nålbinding is a compound of "nål" the word for needle and "binding" in this context suggesting the act of stitching. What is important is that the term has never been used to suggest any other technique.

Toothbrush rugs flourished for a relatively brief time in our history. When I step back to look at the history of nålbinding, I can see parallels that help to appreciate the "era" of toothbrush rugs. It is often said that the origins of nålbinding date to Bronze or early Iron Age, but it may even predate those cultures. Nålbinding is found worldwide, both in historical times and in the present and it seems there is no single point of origin. In Scandinavia in historical times, the farms in Norway and estates in Sweden contributed to the survival of nålbinding in Scandinavia, because these societies inclined inward for survival, relying on skills passed from generation to generation.

After 1850, rapid industrialization transformed Scandinavia. Not as many people needed to work outdoors all day long, and nålbound mittens and socks began to decline in importance and newer types of milk strainers had already replaced the older nålbound ones. During the remainder of the 19th century, sheep breeds imported from England replaced nearly all native-breed sheep in Scandinavia, and the first spinning mills in Scandinavia were fitted out to handle the wools from the English sheep breeds.

Eventually, a desire to preserve textiles traditional to Scandinavian culture led to a renewed interest in wool from native breed sheep. However, it took more than twenty years to find a way to refit spinning mills to handle the native breeds. The Swedish handcraft associations took a major role in fostering the use of native breeds by purchasing the Bergå woolspinnery and another legendary mill, Wålstedts. The first machine-spun native-breed wool yarns started to become available in the late 1940s and 50s, and the availability of the firmer yarns spurred a new interest in the traditional textile crafts – including weaving, knitting, and nålbinding.

Getting back to Swedish toothbrush rugs: Let's consider the possibility that Scandinavians being accustomed to rag rugs probably wanted them in their homes when they came here. Since looms were not typically part of the inventory of belongings brought to America, we can wonder how a Scandinavian immigrant could create a rag rug without a loom.

It's often said that the popularity of nålbinding died well before the period of immigration, but in the last twenty years we realize that some knowledge of nålbinding and some nålbound items did come to America. With this scenario we can surmise that some people, desiring a way to create rag rugs without a loom, turned to nålbinding. Ole Rølvåg's novel 'Giants in the Earth' shows how knowledge of this sort was passed down the road from family to family. We also know that land-grant universities and especially cooperative extension services played a role in sharing how-to directions. For people who needed rag

rugs and had no other means to produce them, nålbound rugs were an option – with how-to directions readily available from the county extension agent.

Ironically Land-grant universities and cooperative extension agencies were also in the business of promoting efficiency and improving productivity – what was, at the time, known as Taylorism – that is to say, the efficiency expert movement. The foundation of Taylorism is the fact that "man may perform simple handicraft operations for thousands of years and yet perform them inefficiently." So while your local cooperative extension agent was promoting nålbound rugs he was also urging you to seek out far more efficient technologies. It was a matter of time until the Swedish toothbrush rug disappeared.

I am not fond of making rugs, nor, to be honest, do I wish to promote them, but my interest in Nålbinding holds. Through my research I have become interested in Scandinavian style Nålbinding where the materials are mostly wool and the items made are useful. While others are interested in Viking nålbinding, my interest is the recent period of Scandinavian Nålbinding when people wrote about, drew, and photographed the items they made. For example, **mittens adorned with a woven band are "traditional" but only 60 or 70 years old (see picture below).**



Socks have always been traditional, but after a span of many years of nålbound socks constructed like knitted socks, we see a renewed interest in older approaches to sock construction. And from the nålbound milk strainers of days past, we see the similar construction techniques used today to make hats.

Nålbound rugs were borne out of necessity and they had institutional support – wavering support, but support all the same. There was a time when the toothbrush needle made sense. You need a very sturdy needle. Steel needles of the size required for the rugs are hard on the fingertips – though occasionally you will see a needle that has been fashioned from the tine of a pitchfork. Bone, close-grained wood, or plastic from a toothbrush handle is a better choice.



Examples of tooth brush needles.

Let's list the gales of creative destruction affecting nålbound rug rugs.

TOOTHBRUSHES:

Today toothbrush handles inset with grips cannot be used – an instance of creative destruction where a newer product creates hardship.

TEXTILE TECHNOLOGY:

We can see developments in textile technology that limit the supply of rugs appropriate for rug making. Fabrics overall are lighter in weight and durability is often more closely matched to the intended lifetime of the garment. Synthetic fibers and knit fabrics may or may not be suitable for rug making, and with the diversity of fabrics in our wardrobes, it can be difficult to amass enough of anything to make a rug.

GARMENT DESIGN:

Garments today are cut to fit differently than in the past. A dress for example might have once required ten yards of fabric, while today a dress uses maybe two or three. For the rug maker less can be salvaged from a garment and the lengths of strips is likely to be too short to be practical. (For toothbrush rugs, strips must be cut on the grain.)

Today, nålbound rug makers prefer to use new fabric. If they are working with cotton, they will prefer top quality quilt fabrics, shunning lower cost fabrics because of potentially destructive dyes. To be honest, the cost per square foot will often exceed the cost of an oriental rug. Woven rag rugs and braided rugs, though still expensive, are cost effective alternatives.

AN EVOLVING SPIRAL OF NAGGING TECHNICAL

ISSUES: Despite the popularity of recycling, the rethinking of the toothbrush rug suffers from an evolving spiral of technical questions and problems.

The legendary quilt maker Jean Ray Laury once promoted blanket stitch rugs made with rag strips for the core and stitches worked in heavy cord. I have heard that these rugs

tend to pucker exactly as shown in her own photos, to snag on footwear, and to be difficult to repair. And Phyllis Hause, also known as Aunt Philly makes annual rounds of quilt shows promoting toothbrush rugs as a way to use up the proverbial quilter's stash. Though she shares good tips and sells her own brand of "toothbrush" needles, what is truly remarkable about her survival lies in her finding a marketing niche within the world of quilting.

ADVANCES IN HEALTHCARE: Finally, there's a sentiment shared by a surprising number nålbound rug makers – I heard it again this past year from three of my nålbinding students – that the technique, especially the Dakota stitch, is so hard on hands and wrists that risk of developing carpal tunnel syndrome is a genuine concern.

With the climate as it is here and now, there is little to encourage a career as a nålbound rug maker. But the gales of creative destruction should not prevent us from appreciating a tradition that flourished for a brief time in our shared history. Those of us who remember parents or grandparents who made these rugs will have good reason to commune with ancestral spirits by making Swedish toothbrush rugs.



Toothbrush rugs nålbound by Larry Schmitt.

For the rest of us a small taste of toothbrush rug making will be enough – and for me, and perhaps for you, Scandinavian-style nålbound mittens, socks and hats worked in wool will beckon. For me the essence of traditional craft lies in the spirit in can impart to my work – carrying on with tradition from what has come before – refreshing traditions with my spirit – sending what I make out into the world to inspire others.

Larry Schmitt, Madison, Wisconsin, teaches nålbinding and bandweaving on a regular basis at North House Folk School in Grand Marais Minnesota

VISITING THE VESTERHEIM COLLECTION:

Vesterheim Goose Eye Rya

BY JAN MOSTROM

THE history of **Vesterheim's goose eye rya (LC4292)** pictured below is sparse, but we know it dates from the second half of the 19th century.



The coverlet size is 54" x 61.5". It is woven with 2 ply yarn in two pieces and joined down the center. The warp sett is about 22-23 epi and the weft sett is 16 ppi creating rectangular blocks rather than square.

The warp stripes are each 18 threads wide with 2 threads of yellow orange between each stripe. Warp sequence is brown, (red, teal) x 3, (red, brown) x 24, (red, teal) x 3, red, brown.

Weft sequence is similar but slightly different with 19 pick stripes of brown, (red, teal) x 2, (red, brown) x 19, (red,

teal) x 2, red, brown. There is a single pick of a redder orange between each block of color. The orange thread is carried down the side selvedge.

Rows of rya knots are in browns, greens, natural white, pinks and purples, warp and weft color with some blips of other colors

added.

Knots are around 4 threads and do not show on the opposite side of the coverlet. The knots are staggered around different warp threads from row to row but are quite closely set with only 1/16" or so between knots.

Rows are knotted at the edge of the block on the orange row for two rows and then switch



Close-ups of the Vesterheim goose eye rya



to the center of the blocks for two rows and continue in this alternating pattern. Some rows are about an inch apart and some are less than half an inch apart.

The coverlet is finished by rolling fabric to the knotted side of the coverlet and tacking it down.

STANDING ON TRADITION: RAG RUG TECHNIQUES

AN EXHIBITION AT MINNESOTA DISCOVERY CENTER

CHISHOLM, MINNESOTA PART II

BY MARY ERICKSON



BARB LEUELLING

Angora, Minnesota

Delicate Unbalance

26" x 48"

Inlay

At the time Barb was weaving this rug her life was as she says, "totally unbalanced...going through a flood, clean up, and deciding to move was being out of control big time." When designing the rug she used stripes at both ends to balance the rug and the small inlay areas to give it stability. The curved feature of the center allowed freeform of movement and gave a dancelike feeling to the rug.

CAROL SPERLING

Eveleth, Minnesota

Ely Lake Ice

Cotton, Corduroy, 26 x 57"

"As a child my mother gave me simple projects to sew, knit, crochet, and embroider. When I became a girl scout and 4-H leader I discovered basketry and frame loom weaving.



Thirty six years ago the MN Weavers Guild and the Duluth Fibercrafters inspired the formation of our Range Fiberart Guild. Participation in the many fiber arts we have studied has occupied a large part of my life. The field is so vast; there is always something more to learn! This exhibit has given me the incentive to try new rug making techniques." The *Ely Lake Ice* rug reflects the lake that Carol lives on. The center of the rug represents the winter ice. The pattern of the changing direction of the twill is created with shaft changing in the same shed as the weft moves across the shed. The bottom panel shows the fish below the ice and the top panel depicts the sky with the moon shapes.



JANET MEANY

Duluth, Minnesota

Three Saki-Ori Obis

Plain weave, black warp

Janet explored Japanese saki-ori weaving techniques with strips of silk from discarded kimonos. Three panels relate to each other in color and composition. Each panel is 11.5" wide and between 64 to 70" long.

EDI THORSTENSSON

St. Peter, Minnesota

Rain Rug

30 x 51"

Plain weave with inlay



Edi learned to weave rag rugs from her mother-in-law, Ellen Svensson in Sweden. Ellen wove rugs and linens but stored her loom away for the summer because farm work took priority. But on rainy days she and Edi would bike to the local

Husmodersforening (homemakers' association) where floor looms were warped for use. In the evenings they would cut strips from old clothing. On rainy days they would head to town, shopping bags filled with rag

weft dangling from their handlebars. Edi's first rag rug was woven in what Ellen called *tyskmonster*, or German pattern.

Edi further relates that "My very first loom came from Sweden. The loom cost 135 kronor, about \$20. Shipping it to Minnesota, in a crate hammered together on the farm by a local carpenter and brought to the depot on the back of the butcher's truck, cost about \$200."

"It is on that loom, with its homemade string heddles, handcrafted hardware, and elegant shuttles, that I have woven all my rag rugs. The last rug I wove was just before the tornado that devastated St. Peter in 1998. Since then, my old loom has rested, waiting for a new rag rug story to tell."

The rain and flooding of 1993 are what inspired Edi to weave the *Rain Rug*. It is a companion to the *Flood Rug* woven at the same time. "...I decided to weave a rug that told about the flood in the simplest way, showing how water had invaded the homes of people living along the Minnesota River's banks, but also how our spirit stood strong, even while walls were giving way."



MARY ERICKSON
Mountain Iron,
Minnesota
Necktie Rug

This rug is woven with old neck ties made of a variety of material such as silk, cotton, wool, and polyester. It was the bright colors and patterns of these neck ties that interested me. But as I was working with them, I realized that

they all had labels. I had forgotten that stores used to put their own labels on the ties. These ties not only have labels from New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles but

also small Iron Range main street stores which no longer exist. In order that the these labels don't get lost in the twisting of the weft, I let the ties hang over the edge so that the labels can be read and this, in a small way,

reminds me of the history of the place I live.



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