

## Rye - Rya - Ryijy? A Compilation from the Norwegian Textile Letter, 1999-2013.

Nineteen years of the *Norwegian Textile Letter* (NTL) are a trove of information on a variety of textile techniques - particularly rye. Or is that rya? The Norwegian authors consistently use the official Norwegian spelling - rye - but Americans often substitute the version ending in 'a.' Swedes use rya; Finns use ryijy. The NTL has included articles on historical boat ryes, on contemporary ryes in Norway, analyses and drafts of ryes in the collection of the Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum, articles about Vesterheim Textile Tour participants learning to weave ryes, and a report of a rye study group. All told, rye articles from Volumes 1-19 comprise 50 pages! This document contains:



- "Weaving a Norwegian Style Båtrya." Sally Scott. Vol. 5, No. 4, August 1999.
- "A Small Båtrya from Lofoten." Janet Meany. Vol. 6, No. 2, February 2000.
- "Nordnorsk Ryer." Inger Anne Utvåg. Vol. 7, No. 3, May 2001.
- "Båtrya." Ellen Kjellmo. Part of "Viking Women's Textiles: A Report of a Seminar at the Viking Museum at Borg in Lofoten." Vol. 10, No. 3, August 2002.
- "Ryas in Norway." Helen Engelstad (translated by Loraine Leftwich and edited by Betty Johannesen). Vol. 11, No. 2, February 2005.
- "New Rya Study Group Forming (an initial notice)." Vol. 12, no. 2, February 2006.
- "Voss Ryer - Traditional Bedcover and Contemporary Art." Marta Kløve Juuhl. Vol. 12, no. 3, May 2006.
- "Excerpt from *Båtrya i gammel og ny tid*." Ellen Kjellmo (translated by Lorraine Leftwich). Vol. 13, No. 1, November 2006.
- "The Contemporary Rya Rug in America." Marion T. Marzolf. Vol. 16, No. 2, February 2010.
- "Textile Artist Laura Demuth." Vol. 16, No. 2, February 2010.
- "Visiting the Vesterheim Collection." (First in a series) Jan Mostrom. Jan analyzed a rya in the Vesterheim collection and provided a weaving draft to reproduce it. Vol. 18, No. 2, February 2012.
- "Some Pieces from the Rya Study Group Exhibition at Vesterheim." Vol. 18, No. 2, February 2012.
- "Visiting the Vesterheim Collection." (Second in a series.) Jan Mostrom. Rya analysis and draft. Vol. 18, no. 4, August 2012.
- "Visiting the Vesterheim Collection." (Third in a series.) Jan Mostrom. Rya analysis and draft. Vol. 19, No. 3, May 2013.
- "Visiting the Vesterheim Collection." (Fourth in a series) Jan Mostrom. Rya analysis and draft. Vo. 20, No. 1, November 2013.

*Shown above: "Protection," by Jan Mostrom. 19" x 56" Wool.*

finished and began unraveling our grene, and the camera lights would flash as we proudly displayed our beautiful weavings.

*by Mary Erikson*

## WEAVING A NORWEGIAN STYLE BÅTRYA

Winding along a Norwegian coastal highway I had time to gather my memories of the four previous days impressions. My awareness and spirit of adventure were heightened by doing something I had never done before and seeing things I had never seen before. Traveling with 28 other textile enthusiasts was more of a treat than I had imagined. There was always much to appreciate and share. Among us no thread was left untouched. We were thrilled with each sighting of sheep, opportunities to visit museums containing unexpected textile treasures, checking out local Husflidens, listening to fishermen's songs, walking up a trail to see Rock Art, seeing the amazing ground vegetation (including lichens), and experiencing the growing sense of camaraderie.



Above: Sally Scott, Lila Nelson, Solfrid Aune,  
Lucetta Walker, June Hanson, Elizabeth Holinaty  
In front: Janet Meany, Kay Larson, Betty Johannesen

The Vågan Folk High School was surrounded by towering pointed mountains. The place had a

pristine beauty. There were wild flowers, many trees, boulders, walking paths, rag rugs hanging over porches, blooming strawberry gardens, a seaport, and classic Scandinavian homes. It was truly beautiful. Everything was a photographic opportunity and in front of us. It provided an ideal setting for work, play, and thought.

On the fifth day I was ready to meet my Båtrya teacher, Solfrid Steigen Aune and warp up a loom. I was eager for weaving; being well fortified with at least four "traditional Norwegian meals." Solfrid's handouts included a short history of rugs, instructions with drawings and diagrams and a color photograph of one of her rugs. We had piles of Kunst yarns from which to choose, experienced classmates, plenty of coffee/tea and baked goods, working looms, and enough time to produce a good-sized rya.

The rya I wove looks like a bit of Norge to me. Each row of knots became a line of thought with an overall plan in mind. I included a special surprise colored knot representing each rya-weaver as a memento of that person. I wove the myth of the flailing fisherman who said, "Save the rya first, I can swim" into my rya. I imagined how warm and life sustaining a rya would be wrapped around a fisherman inside an unheated boat bobbing through a foggy cold night.

One outcome of weaving a Båtrya Norge style rug for me has been to open up design possibilities, using the top side as well as the knotted side on which I had previously concentrated. I can easily imagine the wives of fishermen or village women preparing, carding the wool, spinning, weaving and working hours on knotting colorful or drab rags, fleece, and/or handspun yarns into these precious life warmers. Each rya tells a heroic story, a mark of achievement that made life itself enduring. Now I am intrigued by ways in which to display and use both sides of the Båtrya and tell that story.

By the 23rd day I needed to return to my new prairie home for I was missed and missing loved ones. By the 23rd day I figured that I had eaten at least 30 "Norwegian traditional meals." This was my third Atlantic crossing but a first to Norge. This sojourn was literally a dream come true.

*by Sally Scott*

## **BAND WEAVING CLASS AT KABELVÅG, JULY 1999**

Our Sami teacher, Oliva Nilsen from Manndalen, did not speak English, but as the days passed, we did enjoy a few good laughs as we tried to communicate. Several of us had some Norwegian words, but when a real problem arose, Kay Larson would come in to translate.



Above: Vera Larson, Kathryn McKenney, Carol Kosciak, Sue Henrikson, Tui Hedstrom, Oliva Nilsen, Susan Ramsey  
In front: Donna Duke, Barbara Stam

Oliva brought many of her bands for us to copy. It was a bit disappointing to find no pick-up patterning, but she doesn't do pick-up.

So we began, first choosing a band to copy, and the colors in Rauma 3-ply yarn. Color choices were red, black, gold, white, yellow green, 2 shades of blue, light gray and dark gray. Oliva measured the warp length from "nose to outstretched arm", approximately 2 ½ yards. Janet Kroyer discovered we could make a warp on the

legs of the overturned benches, keeping better warp order and making warps as long as we desired. We were each provided with a 10-inch wooden rigid heddle, and began to warp. We worked in a woodworking classroom, and soon found a vise was a good place to hold the heddle board as we threaded. Tui Hedstrom had a long metal threader that some of us borrowed, it saved a lot of time, and otherwise we used a large eye needle.

When we were ready to weave, our first laugh came as Oliva showed us how to fasten the warp on a birch stick, (She had brought each of us an 8-inch stick.) wrap the warp around and tie it to the stick, then lift up your shirt and tuck the stick into your waistband! Shirley Butterfield commented, "I came this many miles and paid this much money to learn to put a stick into my waistband??" We tied the other end of the warp to a table, desk, chair, bench or whatever was handy and were ready to weave. Then a surprise to most of us! We wove with the rigid heddle next to our body, and the woven part towards the tied end. Most of us who had woven bands had been accustomed to having the woven part next to the waist, but we had come to learn the Sami way.

Kathryn McKenney was the first to finish a band. We all gathered around to learn a wrap and stitch technique, using 2 of the warp ends. What a beautiful finish for a band. A very traditional stitch, we saw this on old bands at the Sami Exhibits at the museum in Tromsø. Soon, Barbara Stam's band was woven and we learned (tried to learn) the next step, an 8 strand flat braid. I can report, at the end of the week, most of us had mastered this braid. Carol Kosciak, our novice weaver, was ready for the small tassel. Now we were making progress! Tassels are really easy! Then came the 4 end round braid... What a challenge, but so attractive a finish. Donna Duke was the first to put that braided finish into her band. 1 2 3 4, red-blue-gold blue. Not so easy! She finally had to go and take a nap!

# NORWEGIAN TEXTILE LETTER

Vol. VII No. 3

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## NORDNORSK RYER

*by Inger Anne Utvåg*

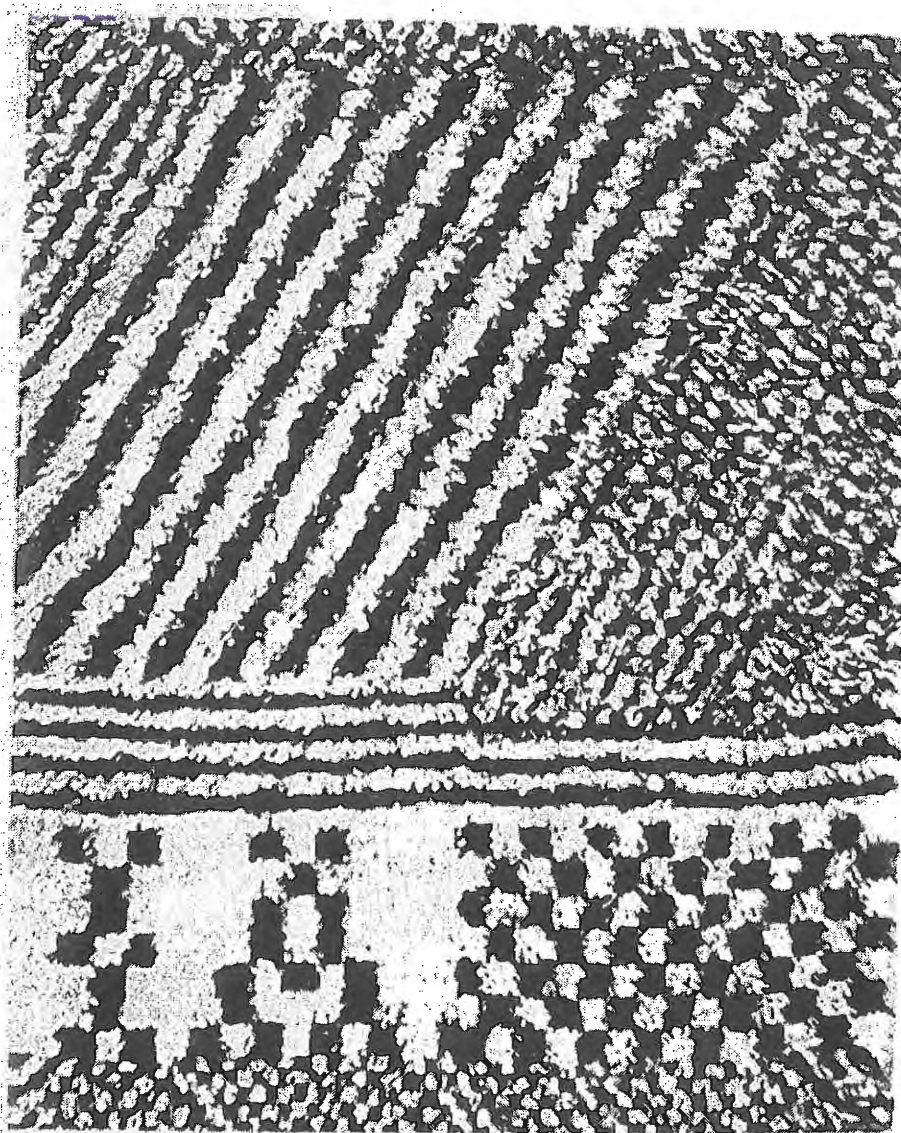
*Translated by Eva Douthit*

While teaching at the State Community College for Educators in Arts and Crafts (Statens Lærerskole) I undertook a study about North Norwegian rye weaving.

I started by acquiring historical knowledge about the traditional technique of rye weaving, focusing, however, primarily on the weavings of Northern Norway.

I undertook this study because I was interested in the textiles of Northern Norway in general, and in North Norwegian traditional textile arts and crafts specifically. The Norwegian Folk Museum (Norsk Folkemuseum), Nordland County Museum (Nordland Fylkesmuseum) and Tromsø Museum became my most important sources of historical information. I was aware of the fact that rye weaving was quite common in Northern Norway, especially in the county of Nordland.

In March of 1978 I traveled to the Kjerringøy trading post in Nordland County. The trading post owns a large collection of registered ryes. All the ryes were hanging from rafters in storage houses (stabbur). They hung in majestic order from the rafters under the open ceiling. Each and every one was far more beautiful than what I had envisioned. After this visit I became seriously committed to exploring the technique of rye weaving and its effects.



*HELLE RYA (Woven by author)*

## HISTORY

The oldest ryes preserved in Norway are mostly from the 17-1800's. But the collection from the country around Vefsn in Mosjøen has a fragment of a rye dated 1681. The date is knotted into the bottom of the right hand corner. We assume this rye has been put to heavy and practical uses and we do not know any other ryes dating that far back in time. (Hoffmann 1973)

We have acquired knowledge about rye weaving prior to the 1700s from written sources.

Ryes from the 1700-1800's have been found all over Scandinavia, and definitive works have been written about ryes in Finland, Sweden and Norway. In my research I have also used minor articles about the topic.

A rye is a woven rug with more or less closely spaced rows of knots creating shag on one side of the rug. The shag side might be plain or patterned. The smooth side has vertical stripes or is checked.

The oldest known written sources about ryes date back to the late middle ages. The ryes were then used as bedding. In one of the sources a rye is also mentioned as part of a boat's inventory, where it was used both as a mattress and as a cover. Ryes have commonly been used that way along the entire Norwegian coast. I became more and more fascinated by the character of the boat rye the longer I worked with the material.

I have wondered whether the rye originated in Scandinavia, or if it was influenced by oriental floss weaving. Scandinavian rye weaving is entirely different from oriental floss weaving; Scandinavian rye weaving is coarse and the shag is sparse, while oriental floss weaving is velvety and tight. In spite of this difference the technique is the same. The ryes were soft and pliable. They were often woven in black, brown and white natural wool. The colors contributed to the overall effect of sheepskin.

In most of the preserved older ryes the floss is made with spun wool yarns. But the yarns are often spun and plied so loosely that it at times appears as if the wool is combed and cut in appropriate lengths. One assumes the floss was spun from the guard hairs of the old Norwegian breed of sheep. The guard hairs were quite shiny. The ryes thus took on the quality of a sheepskin.

The sheepskin was the most commonly used bedding from primitive times to the end of the 1800's. This could explain why the ryes looked so much like a sheepskin. Rye weaving is relatively slow and therefore expensive work. There was no shortage of sheepskin in this country, so the assumption is that ryes were woven because they could be washed, and they tolerated salt seawater well. This means then that the ryes were an ideal and practical bedding solution in the open boats that embarked on long sea journeys. We know that it was common to take along ryes when fishing off the Lofoten peninsula. The ryes were warm and solid. Maybe the ryes originated with a seafaring folk? The fishermen always needed protection against wind and weather.

A well-woven rye is known to be more resistant to daily hard wear than a sheepskin.

Sources indicate that rye weaving inland is of a later date than rye weaving along the coast. We can draw a general conclusion about the similarity of development in all the Scandinavian countries.

## TECHNIQUE

Technically speaking rye weaving belongs to the category of ordinary floss weaving. A rye consists of a foundation and the floss. The knot used to tie the floss to the foundation is the same knot used in most oriental carpets, the "smyrna knot".

Our ryes are unique in the sense that the knot is hidden in the foundation weave. This protects

the knot from wear and tear. The smooth side of the rye also emerges with a clearer design. It is often difficult to distinguish the front from the backside of old ryes. One can assume that this depends on the final uses of the rye. In addition to using ryes in boats, they were used in horse carriages, as horse blankets, as bedding and as wall covers.

As mentioned earlier, the rye consists of a foundation weave (ryetel), and this again consists of warp, weft and knotted floss. The floss is created by knotting evenly spaced threads to the warp ends in horizontal rows. Between each row of floss there are several rows of weft. The fewer rows between the knots, the tighter the floss. The floss is also called "napp, nupp, or nok". If there are many rows of weft between each row of knots, the floss lies flat. Often the length of the floss determines the distance between the rows. This technique is called the "rye technique".

Often the foundation weave was threaded very simply. The loom could be threaded to a two-harness plain weave. In this case the knots would be visible, and the floss side would definitely be the front of the rye. But the foundation weave could also be a 3 or 4 harness twill, diagonal or diamond shaped twill, or a 4 harness goose eye twill. One example of a rye with a double woven foundation has also been found. This rye was uncovered in Ekre in Heidalen. The ryes were woven with a width of 0.7-0.9 meters, with two or three widths sewn together to make one rug. We see more variation in the lengths. Two widths were used for appropriate bedding, and the larger boat ryes used three widths.

Often two widths with different shades of yarn or with different designs on the floss side were sewn together, and they might have different checkered designs on the smooth side. We observe this in several old ryes. In some cases this creates a charming effect.

## MATERIALS

The ryes were mostly made from wool. In some cases linen or hemp have been found in the warp, and in rare cases cotton. In the so-called "rag rug" or "wash cloth ryes" rags of all kinds were used. At times the rags were used together with wool, and sometimes the floss consisted entirely of rags.

Using rags was seen as good economy. People used the rags they had, and mixed different qualities freely. "The rag ryes" were of course of inferior quality compared to the wool ryes.

There was a wide discrepancy of quality in the ryes. The warp thread was often wool spun with a left twist and plied with a twist to the right, and in the weft the weavers used yarn spun in the opposite direction. These ryes were often well planned and of excellent quality. Of course even these ryes show some variety in the quality. The quality of the rye depended to a large extent upon its intended use, and in most cases people simply used the materials they had available. The ryes were evaluated according to its material, its design or its use of color. The weight of ryes we still have preserved varies from 2 to 12 kilos. The bed ryes from the interior of the country or especially from Southern Norway were light and fluffy, while the boat ryes from North and West Norway were thick and heavy.

## COLORS

The colors in the old ryes were often monotonous on the floss side, but showed more variety on the smooth side. The weavers mostly used white, gray, brown and black natural wool for the floss side. There was a surprising amount of variety in how these natural colors were used. And the ryes were exceedingly beautiful. We sometimes see a few spots of dyed yarns in the more "daring" natural wool ryes.

We found ryes with natural yarns along the coast in Northern and Western Norway. A few colored ryes are also found, but these come from the

inland areas of Southern Norway. The colorful ryes were woven with plant dyed yarns, and the cost is estimated to have been twice that of a rye using natural colors. The natural ryes were primarily boat ryes. Plant dyes did not show good resistance against salt water and ocean air. Colored ryes from the end of the 1800's were mostly woven with chemically dyed yarns. This "modernization" contributed to detracting from the quality of the rye. But because of the wear and tear on the ryes on the coast, they continued to use naturally colored wool.

The "gray ryes" dominated the market in Nordland. On the coast of Helgeland we have found ryes with golden and warm tones in the floss, using plant dyed yarns. In Lofoten almost all the ryes were woven with the wool of black and white sheep.

## DESIGN

The design of the Northern Norwegian rye was often quite simple, and of a geometric character. They might have horizontal stripes, vertical stripes or smaller or larger squares, diamonds or zigzag lines.

At times there would also be dates, monograms or small figures or symbols knotted into the design. Ryes with a single color floss were also common. At times it appears that the weaver of a rye did not feel it necessary to display any artistic ambition. Maybe the desire to be artistic found other avenues of expression in northern Norwegian textile weaving. Ryes, it is important to remember, were intended to be practical, useful items.

## THE USES OF THE RYE

As mentioned earlier, the coastal ryes were mostly used in open boats. But as conditions onboard improved by the introduction of cabins, the "båtrye" was not as vital a possession any more. The ryes were expensive, and they are

often listed in inventory documents as valuable possessions.

Some ryes have bands sewn into the edge from which to hang. This indicates that they were used as covers in the horse sled. In this case ryes were used instead of a bearskin.

I am also familiar with the use of ryes as horse blankets in Northern Norway. These ryes consisted of two widths, and the same rye could be used as a coverlet for people riding in the sled on longer trips.

The ryes used as bedcovers in boats, beds, in cabins or in the sled were always used floss side down. That made the smooth side the "right" side. In these situations one can see the weaver took great care to create colorful stripes.

## THE RYES AT THE KJERRINGØY TRADING POST IN NORDLAND

The Nordland County Museum took over the administrative care of the old trading post in 1959. At that time they registered 8 whole and 6 half ryes. We also know that in the death register of the estate of merchant Kjerscow Zahl and his wife were listed 22 ryes and as many sheepskin. Jens Nicolai Ellingsen was a very successful merchant of the trading post; he was married to Anna Elisabeth. Ellingsen was the owner from 1836-1855.

The oldest ryes at the trading post probably date back to his period. Two of the ryes have the letters N E knotted into the floss. Technically speaking the ryes from Kjerringøy do not differ from other ryes. But in spite of that they do have a unique characteristic. Most of the ryes have one or two letters knotted into the floss. It appears that this custom was routinely followed most of the times a rye was woven. The letters almost always correspond to the names of the owners of the place. Several of the ryes at Kjerringøy are fine examples of ryes woven with an artistic expression. I cannot describe each individual rye in detail in this article, however,

so I have chosen a few which influenced me the strongest both in terms of composition and of materials.

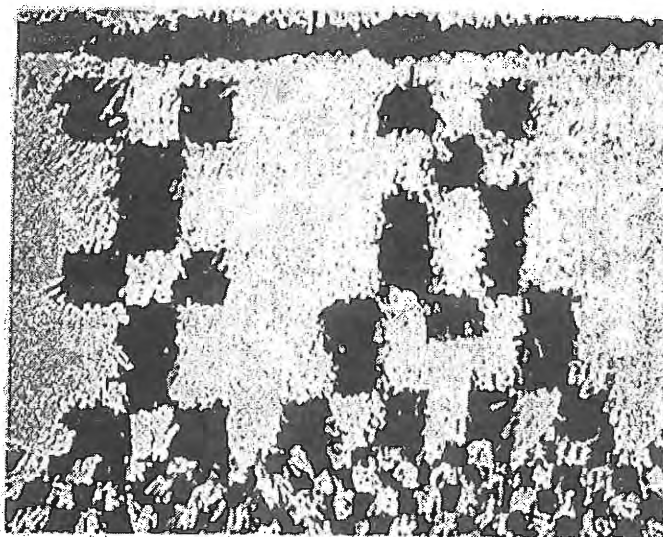
One of the ryes has the letters F G. We do not know to whom the letters refer, but it is one of the finest examples of rye weaving on the island. The foundation is woven in 3-harness twill; the warp is a 2 ply wool yarn of natural brown, light yellow and light raspberry stripes. The warp is set at 7 threads per cm. The weft is also a double ply wool yarn, but in stripes of natural brown, darker yellow and raspberry yarn. This rye gives the appearance of having been knotted with forethought and care. F is tied in a slightly darker yarn and with a few rags. G is made from raspberry colored yarn and a variety of rags. Today the G is almost a pink color. The rest of the floss is of white wool yarn and thin, red rags. The white yarn must have been spun from fine guardhairs. The rye still shines. One of the oldest ryes from Ellingsen's time has N E knotted into the bottom left corner.

The foundation is woven in a 4-harness twill, the warp is from a double ply wool yarn, and it is striped in natural sheep color and yellow. The yellow yarn is plant dyed. Almost all the ryes on Kjerringøy have touches of plant dyed yarn in the weft. The weft in this rye is natural brown yarn and the foundation is striped vertically. The floss is from natural sheep yarns, but some rags were used in making the letters. The rye is woven in two widths, each 88 cm. wide and 159 cm. long. This rye is typical, in a way, of the ryes at Kjerringøy, but here both letters are knotted right next to each other. At a later date letters were knotted into each width. This gave the letters more dominance as part of the design element. This rye is not noticeably spectacular. It appears to be knotted somewhat at random. In spite of this it tells its own "history".

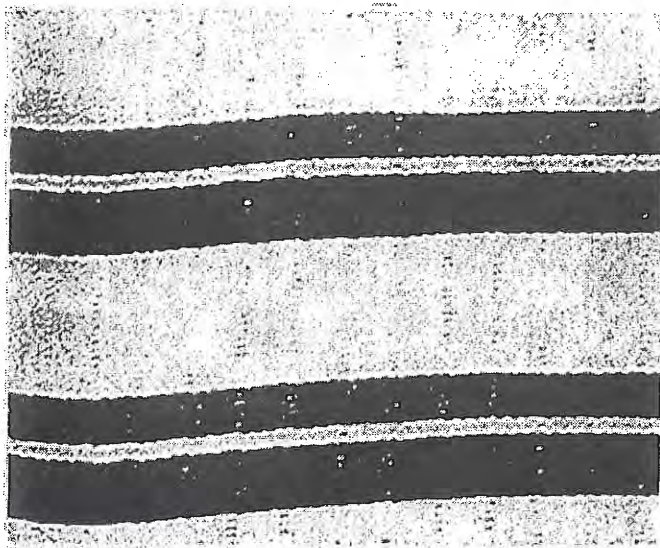
Anna Elisabeth Ellingsen became a widow in 1855 and in 1858 she married merchant Benedikter Kjerscow Zahl. One of the ryes has the letters A Z, so we can assume the letters stand for Anna Zahl. The foundation of the rye is striped and made from natural brown,

raspberry and yellow yarn. The letters are woven over two widths against a light background. The letters appear in the lower half of the rye. The upper half is woven of natural brown and white yarns in stripes. This section includes some rags. The white floss is still quite shiny and again tells us that the weaver chose her material with care. The rye is woven between 1858 and 1879.

My visit to Kjerringøy inspired my own work with ryes. My own ryes are also constructed with some of the same foundation stones in the design (the letters). I have in addition tried to add something new, give them a unique character, and in any case, keep a good tradition alive.



*Detail of Initials in Floss*



*Smooth Side of Coverlet*

The three photos accompanying this article are of a rye I composed, with the following measurements: 1.6 meters wide, 2.0 meters long. The rye is woven in two sections and weighs 4.8 kilos. The foundation is striped vertically in white, black, light gray, dark brown and a somewhat warmer reddish brown yarn. I used mostly natural sheep colors, ranging in shades from white to black, but I have also "sneaked in" a lot of colors in the darker areas of the rye. The smooth side and the floss side must harmonize with each other, at the same time as one should be surprised by the design of the floss when one sees the smooth side, and vice versa.

Warp and weft consist of similar quality yarns, but in the rye knots I used a variety of types of yarn. I used only wool, however.

Since the boat rye has had the strongest effect on me, it is reflected in the feel of this rye. It has a long floss, 8-10 cm. and the rows of knotting are spaced relatively far apart. The floss lies flat. The rye is heavy, but it is very flexible and elastic.

My goal with this work was to weave a rye using my own composition, but one which was anchored in the old, North Norwegian tradition.

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## INGER ANNE UTVÅG

*By Ellen Kjellmo*

From: **Båtrya i gammel og ny tid** Ellen Kjellmo. Orkana, Stramsund, 1996. pp 117-119  
*translated by Eva Douthit*

(Born 1951) Artisan, Professor at the Oslo Community College, Department of Esthetics.

Inger Anne Utvåg was born in Tromsø and grew up in Harstad. She might have earned the distinction of being the only one currently being able to tap into the old rye technique while at the same time developing a unique, personal expression in her rugs.

She first learned about the ryes at Kjerringøy when she was a student at the State Educational School of Arts and Crafts. At the time it was fashionable to get in touch with ones roots and her teachers pointed her in the direction of her heritage. Thus she happened to find an island where old, dusty ryes were going to get a significant importance in her development as an artist. The almost 100 year old ryes became an inspiration for her work, not only technically, but also as a source of artistic, creative expression.

In the beginning she strove for the authentic, simple expression in the traditional ryes. This was a step in the right direction. Her style today is pure simplicity, building on triangles, rectangles and squares. In her last rugs she combines rye knots, thick floss weaving and tapestry weave. She frequently allows long threads of silk to flow down over tightly woven tapestry areas.

Inger Anne Utvåg always weaves her rugs with a twill background and combines two or more sections to make a wider rug, as was done traditionally.

She says she prefers a warp not exceeding one meter wide. The wear and tear on shoulders and arms is heavy when weaving wide warps. When one section is done, she cuts it off and allows its design to influence the design of the next section.

She uses the same set per inch and the same threading for most of her rugs. She has found the optimum set, size and quality of yarns she feels convey her ideas the best. She uses Norsk Kunstvevgarn or Rauma two plied yarns set at 8-9 threads per cm. She uses the same type of yarn for weft.

In her floss she uses silk, linen and beautiful woolens, materials which our foremothers hardly even dreamed about feeling against their weathered skin. Still she has maintained a solid hold on her Northern Norway tradition, and she plays along the entire spectrum of colors and light as well as with the quality of wool.

Her designs are simple, geometric and pure, a style which is infinitely suitable to the rye expression.

Inger Anne Utvåg has had several one-person exhibits both in and out of country and has had several large format commissions both in Norway and in the outside world. Her rugs are decorating large monumental buildings as well as cruise ships and Norwegian coastal steamers.

"Aurora Borealis", the beautiful North Norwegian tapestry about the northern lights, 145 x 400 cm, 1989, is woven in several widths. The design is based on several single colored, calm areas with diamonds in a rich color spectrum. We can detect her Northern Norwegian inheritance in the geometrically developed letters influenced by the rugs from Kjerringoya. Silk threads hang down the length of the central section. One pearl at the end of each thread adds the weight it needs to hang straight.

In "Night without borders II", 175 x 140 cm. she combines the rye technique, floss technique and tapestry weave. Long silk threads run down over geometrically built tapestry areas and create an exciting "space" in the rug.

The beautiful rug "Homage á J. J.", woven in 1993 is in honor of the paintings by Jens Johansen. His beautiful pictures have a strong

connection to Norwegian folklore, and have inspired Inger Anne Utvåg. The rug is composed of clean, geometric patterns and uses both tapestry and rye technique.

Inger Anne Utvåg often finishes her rugs with an edge of tapestry weave in strong colors, using linen yarns.

We recognize the rye technique and the geometric motif in Inger Anne Utvåg's rye. But as the use has changed from protecting against the cold to decorating the walls, the materials, the colors and the expression in Utvåg's ryes have become more sophisticated. Still, we do not doubt that she has been influenced by traditional technique and motifs.

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## SAMI WARP-WEIGHTED LOOMS FOR SALE

The Nordic Heritage Museum is building looms for the Sami Warp-Weighted Loom Workshop in Seattle this October. The looms will be built with the modern Sami free-standing adaptation, an improvement in convenience well overdue after 8,000 years of use. Following the warp-weighted loom workshop, looms will be available on a first come, first served basis. Inquiries can be directed to Kay Larson, (206) 842-7734 [kaylarson@hotmail.com](mailto:kaylarson@hotmail.com)

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## "THE WOVEN COVERLETS OF NORWAY" AVAILABLE THIS FALL

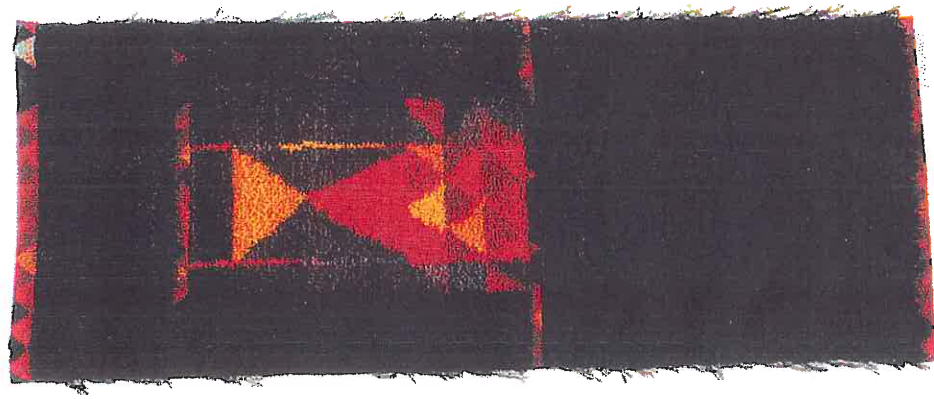
This September the University of Washington Press, in association with the Nordic Heritage Museum, will publish THE WOVEN COVERLET OF NORWAY by Norwegian Textile Guild member Katherine Larson. Over twelve years in the making, this is a full color treatment of the Norwegian coverlets, the women who created them, and the tools and materials with which they were made. A discussion of Norway's yearly cycle of textile production describes the major role textiles played in the lives of Norwegian women prior to the 20th

*Inger Anne Utvåg: "Aurora Borealis", 1989*





*Inger Anne Utvag: "Natt uten grenser II", 1993 (Helge Vold)*



*Inger Anne Utvag: "Homage a J. J.", 1993  
(Helge Vold)*

lection at the Viking Ship Museum in Roskilde.

There are extensive links among apparently simple processes, experience, and talent that are required to transmit knowledge over generations. It is this connection we wanted to extend with our work, and for the enrichment of future research. This project took up the connections among lyngheia (heather-covered uplands), the ancient outdoor sheep, production methods, wool quality, sorting, and traditional production methods: rooing (pulling unshorn fleece from a sheep) sorting, napping, teasing, combing, carding, spinning, weaving, and stamping) and the functional qualities of a sail in wool. Continuation of the project includes testing of the sail, measuring changes in the cloth over time, and comparing the sail to other fibers. It is an exciting endeavor that can give insight into the management of resources and technology in the past.

## Ellen Kjellmo

*Retired College Instructor. (Bodø) She is author of the exciting book, Båtrya i Gammel og Ny Tid (The Boat Rya in Past and Present). She has written many professional articles in various publications. She is curious about cultural themes from the past, humbled when her discoveries reveal a mastery of technique and use of materials by our ancient mothers, glad to learn from their knowledge, and eager to create anew. She experiments with weaves, materials, and dyes. Ellen was a lecturer in the United States at Colour Congress 2002, sponsored by Iowa State University.*

## Båtrya

I chose to research båtrya (boat rya) to show women's and children's roles in Norwegian fishing culture, to show how wise use of materials in connection with technique results in a functional product unsurpassed for its use, and to help dispel the image of a boat rya as an unaesthetic object of little value. A boat rya is a large heavy blanket of 10-18 kilos of home-grown, homespun wool. One side is smooth woven, the other knotted wool pile,

sometimes with rags knotted in as well. Typically, the knots are not visible from the other side.

Researchers often conclude that things come *to* us; nothing has come *from* us. Some suggest the boat rya is a variant of oriental rugs. I claim that the boat rya is a more technical, ancient discovery. You don't speak in that case of patterns and fine colors, but quite simply about the product's value for its purpose.

Linguists claim that the word 'ru' came to Ireland with the Vikings, which could indicate rya was used already in Viking times, long before oriental rugs were known in Scandinavia. Evidence of flossa (a shorter pile weaving) is found around 300-400 in Øst-Prøysen, and in Sweden from the 700s. In Norway, there is evidence from the 1400s through farm sale records and cloister records. Finally in the 1600s comes indisputable evidence; a rya from Vefsn has the year 1681 knotted in the pile.

It isn't difficult to find ryas in North Norway, but they are of more recent dates. Even though they weren't valued as beautiful objects, and many were torn up, most regional museums have examples in their collections. Many are privately owned.

The large, heavy boat ryas are all woven in a twill variant, diagonal twill ..... Stripes and squares in strong colors mark the smooth side. The knotted side is not known for pretty patterns. There may sometimes be squares, stripes, frames, and geometric patterns, but boat ryas are most often knotted with blended yarns of a wide variation. When you examine an animal pelt in shades of gray, there is little doubt that boat ryas are inspired by fur pelts, but are actually an improvement for their purpose. While a pelt becomes stiff and hard after washing, a rya can be washed and dried and retain its softness.

Indications are that the oldest ryas were made of "utganger" wool. The strong, smooth hard-

spun warp yarn has long fibers that appear to be guard hair. Because this sheep wasn't clipped, but hair that was shed was used, the fibers don't have a cut end where water could enter the fiber. This, in addition to a high lanolin content, tight twisting, and a tight weave, make the rya almost waterproof.

The weft yarns lie hidden in the tight warp and therefore receive little wear. You can see that lesser quality yarn was used for that purpose.

The pile yarn is thick-spun, but tightly twisted. In some cases it is spun so unevenly that you wonder whether it was carded at all. Wool rags and leftover wool from other weavings create surprising spots in the pile.

Natural colors in the oldest ryas include gray, white, brown, and black. There is also frequent use of colors from plant-based dyes; for example, gold and brown from birch trees, heather, and leaves. I recently discovered the use of korsje for purple in a rya from Steiger Bygedetun. The later ryas are characterized by the use of synthetic dyes in the warp, but usually natural colors for the pile. While the larger boat ryas from Lofoten, Vesterålen, are characterized by simplicity in both form and color, the ryas from further south are more colorful.

There is little doubt that creating a boat rya was the work of women and children. This is confirmed by written and oral sources. Sorting the wool was an important part of the process. The long fibers were used for the warp, the lesser quality for the pile, and the poorest wool for the weft. We know little about how the wool was handled before spinning during the earliest times. It could have been combed. My informants only remembered using purchased warp yarn. I have done little analysis of ryas that have hand-spun or three-ply yarn in the warp.

The thick pile yarn was spun in the home, a large amount of wool for each rya. The yarn was washed after spinning in fish bile instead

of soap. Then it was "white and fine," my informants told me. Beating the yarn slightly with a wooden paddle felted it sufficiently that the yarn remained twisted when cut in short lengths.

To set up the loom was a group effort among many women in the neighborhood; most women knew the process. A rya had a 7-10 centimeter border on each end without knots, woven in twill. A row of knots followed. Two centimeters of twill was woven between each row of knots. The rya pile yarn was wound around a "noppakjevle" and cut to lengths two times that of the pile. The "Smyrna-knot" was used; simple to knot, and known the world over. Several of my informants told me that it was the mother or grandmother who wove the background; it was the children's job to knot.

The knotting is done on an open shed, on the raised warp threads. In a four-harness warp-faced weave two threads both in the warp and weft lie under the knots and hide them on the smooth side.

Rya weaving continued after the turn of the century; some have described rya weaving up to 1940. Today it has been rediscovered, and like the phoenix who rose from the ashes, but now in a new costume, not for warmth for the body under a cruel sky, but to satisfy the eye and mind.

## Anna Norgaard.

*(Denmark) She is a trained weaver who works with the reconstruction of archaic textiles, undertaking projects with museums, textile conservators and textile researchers. She has woven and sewn costumes for the Universitetets Oldsaksamling (University Museum of Cultural Heritage) in Oslo – a Bronze Age costume, a costume from the Roman Iron Age, to costumes from the folk migration period, and a cloak from Viking times. She works now with a project together with women from Greenland on the reconstruction of costumes from the 12 and 1300s, Nordbodrakter. The women spin yarn*

*From Norwegian Textile Letter 7  
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# NORWEGIAN TEXTILE LETTER

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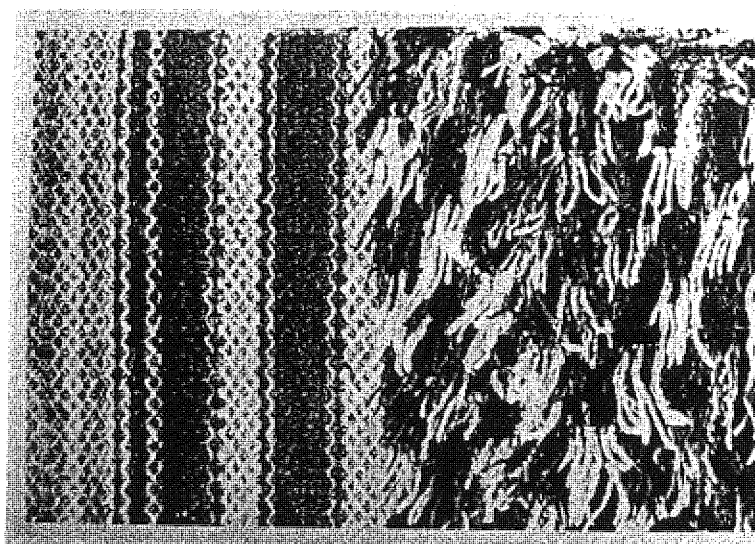
Feb, 2005

## RYAS IN NORWAY

*by Helen Engalstad*

*translated by Loraine Leftwich and edited by Betty Johannesen*

The oldest preserved ryas here in Norway are dated from the end of the 1700's. If we are going to study rya weaving before that we must turn to written sources. Documentation before 1660 is very sparse and gives an appearance of coincidence. A single inventory list, a sales contract or an estate settlement casts a glance over the homes, furnishings and bedcovers that especially interest us here, but we don't get any detailed pictures. Not until the end of the 1600's do the source materials get richer. From this point on we can precisely determine the rya's place among the overall textile furnishings. We meet it as a common article for everyday use in a majority of Norwegian homes and we understand that rye weaving has been known and lost in all parts of the country. But the information on technique and patterns is sparse, so it is first through the study of the still existing ryas together with oral traditions of the 1800's, that we distinguish the local characteristics, which have characterized rye weaving.



*Fig. 7: Rya from Gloppen in Nordfjord*

On the 12th of January 1460, Helge Bergsvensøn tendered as payment for a place to live in Afflodals, Sogn in Jemtland among other things "ten ells of cloth, one rya, one åkle."<sup>1</sup> This is the first time we encounter the term rya in the old Norwegian documents. Several more times we hear about ryas in Jemtland. Namely in 1480 "2 ryer" are enumerated among chattels in an inheritance,<sup>2</sup> in 1498 where "1 rye" is included in a payment for a farm,<sup>3</sup> in 1500 with an inheritance distribution,<sup>4</sup> and in 1537 with a farm exchange.<sup>5</sup> A rya was determined to be worth one Jaemzsa mark, which according to the money system at the time had the value of one cow.

In the 1500's we often hear of ryas in different places around the country. Of special interest is an inventory list from Tuterøyens cloister<sup>6</sup> from 1531 or 1532. Here it says "item for recording: 16 beds, 16 ryas and 5 pair bed sheets and 14 woven coverlets". The monks also used ryas as bedcovers, possibly the cloister rules contained a requirement about it, as such was the case at Vadstena cloister.<sup>7</sup> They have probably been used in other Nordic cloisters.

The monks on Tautra were especially interested in raising sheep<sup>8</sup> and conducted research with the rearing of imported English or Spanish merino sheep. The current Tautra sheep, with its especially fine wool, could have descended from these, but later surely were crossed with other foreign breeds presumably in the 1700's.

We must presume that the monks used their homegrown wool when they had woven ryas. In another register from Tuterøyens cloister are mentioned "item two old rya". The clergy has clearly utilized ryas also in other places as bed furnishings, as an inventory list on the furnishings of the deaconate in Trondheim<sup>9</sup> states in 1539 "one unmade bed with Coln bolster, rya and English åkle" and on Holtålen's rectory<sup>10</sup> in 1550 "one half worn rya" and in 1572 "one worn out and torn rya".

In all, ryas seem to be very common in Trøndelag in the 1500's as well as later. Among the property which Archbishop Olav Engelbrektssøns staff were to have taken from Ing Ottesdatter (to Østråt) and Herr Vincent Lunge in the period 1529-32 also appeared to be ryas.<sup>11</sup>

Fru Inger says "I have lost some bolsters, rye, bed sheets and bed coverings on this hunt, which Brett Karlsen was upon" and Herr Vincent complains about having had taken "item a beautiful bed with all the accessories, a rya and 10 fur coverlets worth 30 marks."

At Trondheim farmstead (translator's note: bishopric) ryas were also very common. In 1596 there were found at "fateburet" (storage

building) no less than 22 ryas.<sup>12</sup> They also certainly must have been woven earlier because 12 are "worn and not useful" and 10 half worn.

On Swedish and Finnish royal properties and castles in the 15-1600's a remarkable number of ryas are noted. There is nothing corresponding to that in Norway, even though in no way were ryas unknown here.

In the accounts from Bergenhus in 1518 there are among many personal property items as "Ludwig the bailiff in Rødeøen answers here" and names "Item one rya"<sup>13</sup> and in 1521 appears the entry "These inscribed hereafter are the goods which fell to my men from Olav who was hanged in AD 1521." Among other things here "Item 1 length of cover or rya" and later "item three ryas".<sup>14</sup> Among 28 bedcoverings counted in 1523 are "one rya"<sup>15</sup> and finally in 1603 we hear about "two old ryas soon useless."<sup>16</sup>

In Akershus ryas are mentioned only once,<sup>17</sup> but they take a modest place beside the remaining abundant bed coverings, which go under the description "Good flemish bed coverings", "large half flemish covers or just large bed covers."<sup>18</sup>

We don't know much about the ryas used in the middle class homes and farms all over the country during this period but Christen Jennssøn in 1646<sup>19</sup> explains in his Dictionarium that "Ryas or *Rugge* is what is called a napped bed cover, which is woven of twined wool yarn". We can assume that ryas were common at least in the area around Bergen where he was from.

Then in the 1600's one rya is mentioned as the cause of a marital dispute in Stavanger.<sup>20</sup> Ryas in the last half of the 1600's were so completely common that it is reasonable that they were in use in large parts of the country in the first part of the century.

### **Ryas We Still Own**

**Material, technique, measurement, weight, color and pattern**

A rya is a woven tapestry with more or less scattered rows of knotted pile on one side.<sup>1</sup> The pile side can be a single color or patterned, and the smooth side often exhibits colored stripes, squares or the like. Characteristic for the large majority of our ryas, the backs of the knots lie hidden in the ground weave. Here they are subjected to less wear and they don't disturb the pattern on the smooth side. Which of the two sides one regards as the right and which as the wrong can be difficult to decide. It probably was decided by the rya's immediate use; as wall tapestry, bed covering, boat or sled rya.

### **Material**

The materials in our preserved ryas are nearly exclusively wool. Some linen and hemp have been used as warp and in a very few cases cotton was used.

For the so-called rag rya or cloth rya, fabric pieces of all kinds have been put to use instead of or together with wool. With the exception of cotton and a few of the fabric pieces, we can assume that the materials present are in the districts where the ryas were woven, that is all over the country.

Sheep's wool has from prehistoric time been one of the foremost raw materials for textile art in Scandinavia. Still, the interest in sheep farming and the use of wool has changed down through the times. Climate and the natural grazing conditions along the coast has always made it easy to raise sheep here, but the sheep breed which thrived under a primitive method of working or with very limited supplies of winter feed was light weight, and the pelt had 2 kinds of wool: a coarse but lustrous guardhair over a softer layer of fine silky underhair.

When the textile industry in the last half of the 1800's, with its machine spinning and weaving, it little by little displaced home industry, insisting that first class wool should solely consist of long, soft, strong curly wool. The worsted yarn spinning factories considered it a defect if there was straight, guard hair in the

wool, and they didn't appreciate its silky sheen. Therefore people began to import new sheep breeds.

The difference between the old Norse sheep race "stuttrova sauene" (shorttail) or *spelsau* and the foreign English and Spanish sheep must always have been conspicuous. Our sheepbreeding history is a presentation of steadily repeated research into either introducing new breeds, or to try mixing with another race with the importation of breeding rams. The research took place with more or less momentary success but the results in the long run seem to have had relatively little success in the last half of the 1800's.

In and of itself we have here an outstanding illustration of the old tug of war between a foreign oriented and progressive upper class and a stubborn rural class for whom the once accepted method of working, built upon the local conditions, played a major role. It helps little that business men or nobility introduced new sheep breeds, when at the same time nothing was done to change tending of the animals, especially in winter. Many may also have preferred *spæla* wool on the basis of its special characteristics. For rya anyway, it must have been ideal. The guardhairs are a superior material for the tightly spun, strong and resilient warp threads, and the lustrous wool gives the pile side a surprising likeness to furs. Not least, *spæla* wool is an advantage for the patterned rya where the plant dyed pile appears to have an intense silky sheen. Finally it is worthwhile to note that *spæle* wool has always been regarded as best suited for sea clothing.<sup>2</sup>

In order to correctly utilize the wool of the old Norse sheep, it must be sorted. This happened in the old days with one laying the sheared wool on the table. With fingers or with a rough comb one pulled up the coarse wool, the so-called "cover" and divided it from the "fine." The soft underwool was strong, soft and very shiny and was preferred for decorative weaving.<sup>3</sup> One must think a similar sorting took place with the

wool clumps, which were pulled off during shedding time.

With the use of a comb, one avoided carding the wool. This had a big advantage in that the guardhair was not exposed to breakage and splitting and therefore lost its shine. Such wool combs are found at the Norwegian Folk Museum, among others, and they surely have been in use since time immemorial.

The wool was spun as a rule with a spindle. In the course of the 1600's, despite the fact that the spinning wheel became common in Norway, the spindle remained in use tenaciously in most sections of the country. Old folk still remember that the spindle was taken along, just like the other handwork, when they tended herds or when they would pay a visit to a neighboring farm.

The wool of the guardhair also was used both for warp and pile. But one only seldom preferred the softer ground wool for "napp" or "nokk" which the knotted pile is also called. In such a case it is often fulled. Maybe the soft wool also became more felted in use than is the case with the outer hair. For the most part the spinning and twining holds up well in the soft felted yarn, but it very often has loosened itself completely in the pile composed of pure outer hairs. Wool that has lain spun for a longer period of time preserves the twine better than newly spun wool used in pile. The old Norwegian sheep race was completely dominant until around 1830, but also in later ryas, its silky wool has been put to use. Nevertheless little by little it was replaced by the new wool and yarn types, which had to do with the attempt to use machine spun wool, but then this obviously wasn't sufficiently strong and elastic for warp threads in a rya, so people went over to using cotton instead. The large rya from Frosta is an outstanding example of the combination of old rya technique and modern materials: warp of heddle yarn, and pile of factory spun and dyed wool.

For the weft, people often used wool of finer quality. In ryas with a 3 or 4 shaft groundweave the weft lay completely covered while in ryas with 2 shaft ground weave the weft was visible (Rep weft). These ryas have checkered patterns in the pile and the knot backs are visible on the smooth side. There is no doubt that it is the pile which forms the right side. The ground weave has a linen warp and the weft is mainly of cowhair. The ryas are made primarily as decorative weaves, possibly as wall hangings, and consideration is not given to eventual wearing of the knots or the value of the material's inherent warmth.

As it is evident from the name "nauthår" it comes from cows, either with the currying or the like during preparation of the cowhide. One then uses a lime treatment which loosens the hairs. In 1723 an estate document from Fåvang states "In the iron to saw the hair from the hide with" (I jern at sage Haar af Huder med), which hints that the lime method of treatment is of newer date. Overall it speaks of "horsehair clothes" and "cowhaired coverlets" often. In order to spin cowhair it must be mixed with a smaller amount of sheep's wool.

Hair of goat and dog could have been used in a similar manner but it isn't encountered in Norwegian ryas. In the 1700's we hear of mixed yarns having a prominent role in rya weaving here. We find it in use as weft in the ground of diagonal weave or as warp in the above-mentioned ryas with a ground of 2-shaft rep.

For the simpler rya one used either cloth pieces in place of or together with woolen wads. It is evident that this was the natural economic need to utilize all scraps, but often the rags are placed with a truly artistic sense for material and color effect. Such ryas are not less interesting because the small cloth strips give us a good picture of utility weaving from earlier times. Often the scraps can also create a basis for a relatively exact dating of the rya. Very interesting is a report from Hjørundfjord in Sunnmøre.<sup>4</sup> It is said here that businessmen who traveled to Trondheim purchased and

brought back "Lisse," that is, small clippings from the tailor workshops of the army. This eventually became used for pile but it turned out to be a little stiff and such a rya was not good and warm. We now have, "klude" (cloth) and "fillerya" (rag rya), preserved mainly from the coast of Møre, nevertheless it is evident from written sources that they were in use over the entire country and often it is this form of rya people since stopped weaving. All scraps would certainly be used. The name rag rug in this century (1900's) has been transformed into a much simpler 2 shaft weaving technique which in and of itself doesn't have anything in common with the old rya than the use of cloth pieces: rags.

Warp threads in the preserved rya are as a rule of 2 thread left spun and right twined wool, but the weft is spun and twined the opposite way. Variations often still occur and for many of the rya, people have used those materials they had at hand. Large parts of our rya material carry an early sign of being the last generation of an old tradition-rich home craft which is in the process of disappearing, displaced by new times and its cultural forms. In estate records rya yarn is spoken of several times, but is not defined more closely as to whether it is warp yarn or pile yarn. At Modum in 1679 a *bismerpund* (about 12 lbs) of woolen rya yarn is valued at 2 dollars (Norwegian banknote before 1875 -translators note). A *lispund* (18 lbs.) was set at the same value in 1698 in Skien and in 1699 in Larvik 16 marks (translator's note - one mark was approximately ¼ kg.) of wool yarn and 6 marks of wool for a rya while a new rya as a rule was valued at 2-3 dollars. Especially beautiful or large rya were valued up to 5 or 6 Norwegian dollars (before 1875.) *Wa-* yarn rya or *War-* yarn rya are mentioned often in Drangedal and Fyresdal around 1700. Probably *Wa* or *War* means that the rya was woven of a lesser quality wool, probably winter wool. According to Hans Ross, people in Telemark, Setesdal and at Jæren used the syllable *va* to report or reinforce an idea of deficiency.

Rya are valued in part according to their color and pattern, but first and foremost according to their materials which are transformed during production and this has considerable meaning relating to boat rya. The weight of the preserved rya varies between 2 and 12 kilograms. Kristian Kielland mentions also that the weight of those rya in estate documents has been up to 2 *bismerpund*.

While bed rya from inner and southern Norway most often are small and light, the boat rya from the west coast and especially from Northern Norway are large, thick and very heavy. It is a solid cover, able to withstand wind and weather and the teeth of time.

### Technique

Technically it is natural to speak of the rya's ground weave (*ryetel*) which consists of warp and weft and its pile (*ryenapp*), which is developed by knotting the clipped, yet long threads tightly to the warp at regular distances and in rows on the reverse of the weave. The pile is called "*nopp*", "*nupp*" or "*nokk*."

If there are few weft rows between the knotted rows the pile is very tight, and if it is short the knots stand right up and completely cover the groundweave. This is called *helfloss* (flossa or pile weave).

If in contrast there are many weft rows or threads between knot rows, the pile, if it is long, will lie down and create a more or less sparse layer over the ground weave. Most often the length of the floss determines the distance from one pile row to the next, or perhaps it is little longer. This method of weaving we call rya technique. It must certainly be noted that many of our preserved rya have a very tight and thick pile layer but the tufts at the same time are very long, (5-7 cm.) The pile lies down partially instead of standing up straight and stiff as in a normal *floss* or *pile weave*.

For completions sake it must be mentioned that half flossa (voided pile weave) is a patterned weaving with a smooth groundweave. The pattern is created by straight, vertical comparatively short pile knots against a flat bottom. Here in this country we have preserved a series of pillow covers and bench coverlets in half flossa and flossa, but in the creation of their patterns and their groundweave technique, åkle and billedvev are closer, that won't be the subject of the research here. We shall now go through what characterizes the method of weaving in the preserved Norwegian rya.

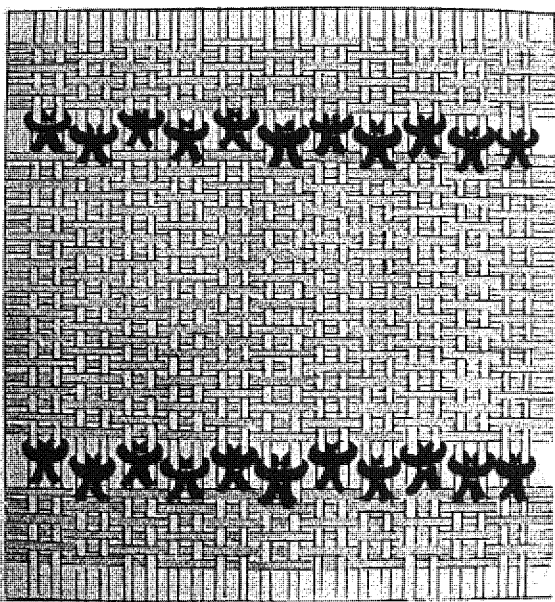


Fig. 10 - Knotting in ryaas with a 2 shaft rep ground

The groundweave is very simple. It can be 2 shaft weft-faced rep, 3 or 4 shaft diagonal or point twill and finally 4 shaft return twill or goose eye pattern.

Only one single Norwegian rya exhibits a more complicated binding in the groundweave, namely, the one from Ekre in Heidalen, where doubleweave, so called *flensvev* was used.

There is then, as a rule, an interaction between the knotting of the pile and the groundweave's threading, and it is appropriate to study this relationship a little closer.

The warp threads are double and always of strong linen thread. The pile rows are created

by knotting a common smyrna knot over each of the doubled warp threads. Then the knot back (that is to say the back side of the knot) in this manner becomes visible on the smooth side. One must assume that it is the pile side that should be the right side, as much as these rya always have checkered patterns in color in the pile. The linen in the warp and the tight wool weft make the rya stiff and not pliable. They are best suited as wall tapestries or floor rugs.

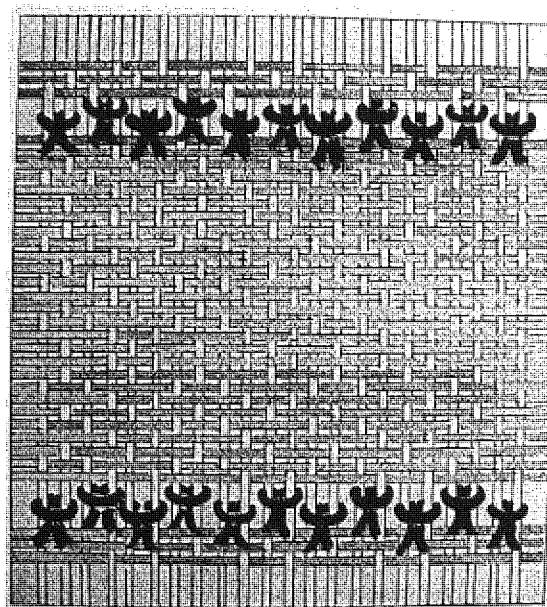


Fig. 11 - Rye with a groundweave of 3 shaft point twill

When the weft is very loose, the weave behaves like a rep. These rya, whatever the effect of pattern and material, relate to the previous group.

#### ***Rye with a groundweave of 3 and 4 shaft twill.***

The warp and weft are always of wool. Only in a couple of late examples is cotton yarn substituted for the wool yarn. The warp thread is otherwise 2 ply and warpspun such that it becomes a tight and supple thread. The threading of the weave is very tight, approximately 80-110 threads per 10 centimeters. The weft is 1 or 2 ply, loose and spun opposite of the warp.

When the pile is knotted in, the common smyrna knot must be pulled up a bit. Partially for this

reason and partially because the warp is so tight can one nearly *never* see the knot backs on the back side. A practiced rya weaver has amazed me in this respect.<sup>5</sup> It was necessary to protect the knots against wear so that the rya remained strong and the pile durable. Moreover, the knot backs if they were partially visible on the smooth side would disturb the beautiful striped and checkered patterns. Since it is obvious that it is the smooth side that should have been used as the right side, is easier to understand on this basis the reason behind hiding the knots.

If the pile side was to have a pattern, then it was necessary to get the knots in different rows placed right over one another. The distance between the rows of knots was therefore decided by the weft repeat, the latter repeated one or more times.

This technique is especially used in the light plaid-like ryas. In the older ryas the return twill is always executed very precisely and it is closely observed that the pile knots are placed every time the pattern "turns". The knotting method is arranged such that there is always a knot in the middle of the goose eye. In order for this to come out right, the distance among the rest of the knots in the row is varied. So the same method of knotting is observed on all rows.

Figure 20 shows the knotting of rya number 45, plate 27 from Hole in Skjåk. It is a good example of a painstakingly executed rya weaving. In the newer ryas there are often errors in the ground weaving and the knotting is very irregular.

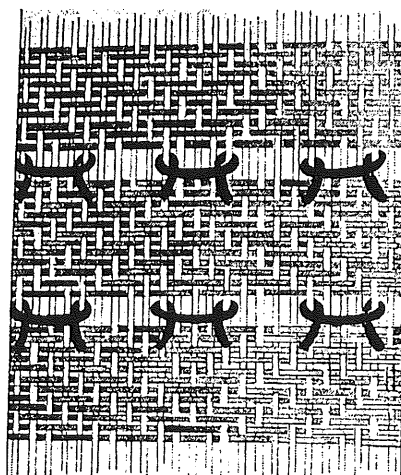


Fig 20 - Knotting of rya  
from Hole in Skjåk



Plate # 27 - from Hole Skjåk

#### *Ryas with a groundweave in korndreiel.*

A variation of goose-eye, namely *korndreiel*, is also used as a ground. Here the warp repeat goes just over 6 or 8 threads such that the pattern is divided up in small diagonal squares.

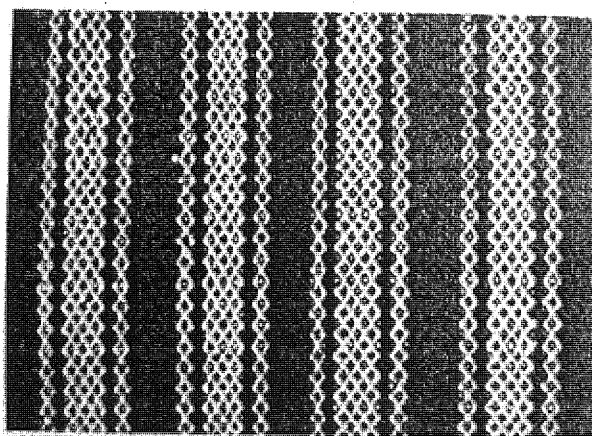


Fig. 9 Rya with groundweave in korndreiel

#### **Ryas with a groundweave in doubleweave, so called *flensvev* (pick-up double weave).**

For this weave two sheds are used which just hold together along the pattern edges. Richly developed square patterns are best suited. Of

such rya we know of only one, plate 14 from Ekre in Heidal but they surely have been very common,<sup>6</sup> and they have been finely suited to rya as the pile is set in after every row of

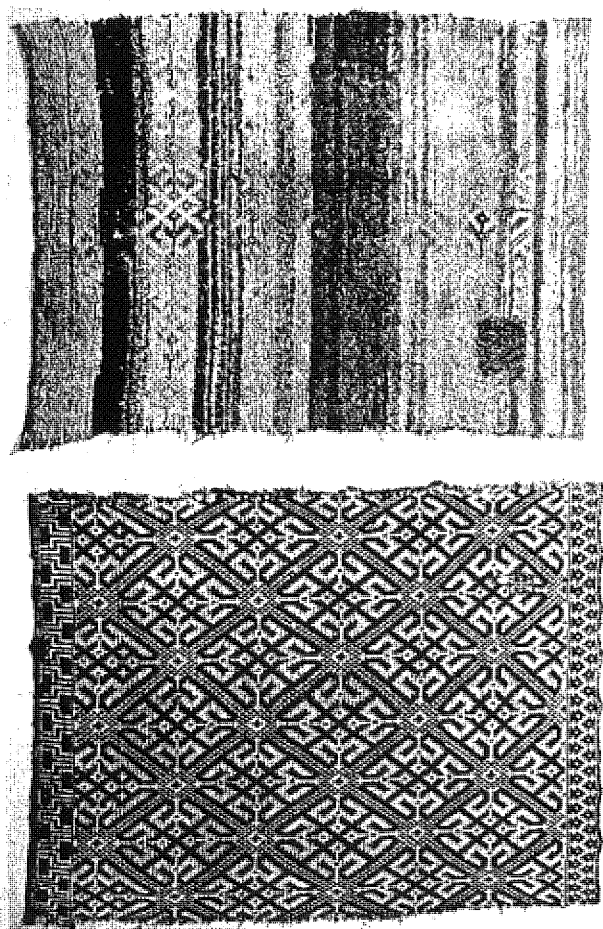


Plate 14 – Rya with flensvev groundweave

squares in the pattern's two sheds and is also invisible from the smooth side. This appears as a regular 2 shaft weave divided up into dark and light squares.<sup>7</sup>

A well woven rya represents a considerable amount of work first with the preparation of the wool, later with calculating the pattern and finally with the weaving itself. The pile was not as in modern pile weaving knotted over a stick or ruler in connected knots and later clipped off. No, one wound the yarn around a thick stick or wooden peg with a groove in it. When it was full one clipped along the groove and in this manner got threads of similar length to knot.

This work was so easy that small children were assigned to do it.<sup>8</sup>

The rya were as a rule woven in a width of 70-80 cm and then 2 or 3 widths were sewn together. Two were suitable for a regular bed rya but for larger boat rya one had to use 3. Children's rya were spoken of often; their size was naturally adapted to the bed or cradle. Just one of the preserved rya were woven in a width of 135 cm but its ground weave was also 2 shaft and therefore could have been woven on a vertical loom. For the different variations of twill one presumably used a horizontal loom. Very wide looms have naturally been in use on the larger farms for *dreiel* and such but they haven't been especially common among the relatively poor fisher folk along the coast.

### Colors

The colors in the preserved rye are amazingly monotonous. We are so used to the strong, vibrant colors and bold combinations which characterize Norwegian folk embroidery and weaving that we can only wonder about the white, gray, brown and black tones which at first appear to dominate in rya.

They show us a new side of our folk art, more conservative and working with simpler means but likewise with a sure sense for decorative effect. Individuals understood how to utilize wool's changing luster and natural color nuances in a masterly manner. In such a manner could one learn to work with wool, steeped in tradition from earliest times.

In an estate document at Kaupanger manor in Sogn from 1678 are named different rya, more closely specified are four gray rya. This should indicate that people at one time distinguished between rya which were patterned in several colors and others which were woven of undyed yarn in the sheep's original gray and brown shades of wool.

Possibly the gray rya was regarded as a simpler kind, since the price of dyed rya are nearly

double that of the gray, but certainly other factors were an issue.

It is worthwhile to notice that the colored ryas which are preserved come for the most part from the inland districts. On the other hand, gray ryas belong along the coast in the west and north. These are boat ryas, intended for use in the open fishing boats. The plant dyes couldn't withstand the corrosive sea air and salty seawater. They have therefore found scant use and where it occurs, it appears they are now strongly faded. It is in the sea districts where rya weaving has lasted the longest so it isn't so rare that the gray rya now occupies the largest place in our Norwegian rya material. As we later shall see, the rya in strong colors were very common.

Before the middle of the 1800's people used the old dye stuff, found in nature, to dye wool for the colored ryas. Woad, indigo, cochineal and similar overseas materials had to naturally be imported but people also knew how to use dye stuffs found in the countryside's own plants and soil. Dyeing occurred in the homes and even after aniline dyes in 1856 were first produced and from the 1870's were common commodities here in the country, many continued to use their familiar dye recipes.

But it couldn't be avoided that Perkins' famous violet also left its mark on our ryas. Its occurrence is attributed to the chemical industry's newest discovery and the "den lilla mote" (the lilac fashion) which was created in the French capital during "le second empire" (the Second Empire).

Now the brilliance has disappeared and the violet appears faded and gray but in its time the intense blue and red violet colors together with the wool's natural gray tones must have given the rya a remarkable decorative look.

From the end of the 1800's, we can follow in the rya the wider appearance of the chemical colors in the wool industry. This did not work out to the advantage of rya weaving. The wool

yarn had lost its brilliance and colors appeared dead and cold. Gone is the silk like *spaele* wool in the pile, the linen like hard spun wool thread in the warp and the fine nuances in colors, all of these which gave the old rya their great charm.

### *Patterns*

"For dy wæffue the scriffter till sammen liigerwiis som ryer oc sengklede wdaff attskillig farffue forwden sind Oc skiell" (In order to weave they beat together some ryas and bedclothes on the outside several colors without thought and reason) wrote the Danish Carmelite monk Povl Helgesen in his war writings of 1530. We have here the best description we could wish for about the rya's appearance at this time. The colors have been placed << uten sind og skill>> (without thought and reason) and any planned pattern division of the surface. The same can be said about the majority of the preserved ryas. It is possible in this country that people wove "prydrye" (art rya) with detailed pile patterns. We shall return later to this question. To set in one or several strong colors against a gray mixed ground seemed to be somewhat common.

In many places people have had a certain affinity for bright red pile knots of wool or cloth. They were located along the edges such that they stuck out when rye lay with the smooth side up. We hear about some like this in an estate document from Vestby in 1748 where there is named "I sort og graae rannede rye med røde lapper og hvit samt guul flossing" (One black and gray striped rya with red rags and white and yellow tufts.) On the smooth side there is a striped pattern which is most striking. Lengthwise stripes were before, like now, very common in all kinds of bed covers. We know it so well from bolsters to mattresses to comforter covers or in the white woolen coverlets with blue or red stripes. Plate 5 shows the smooth side of a rya of characteristic width and narrow stripes.

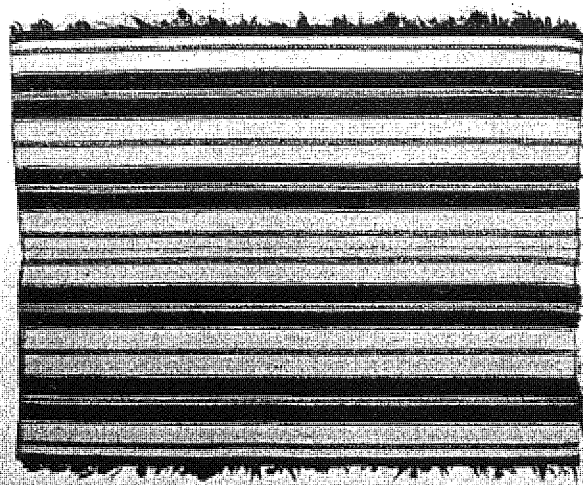
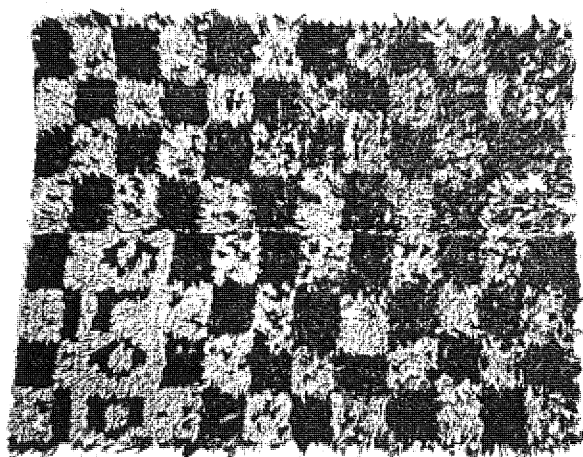


Plate 5 – Rya in which one can see pile knots along the edge

Ryas with a single colored pile were very common. For the most part the patterns of the Norwegian ryas, as in the Swedish and Finnish "slit rya" (very day ryas) are of a very simple geometric character. They are limited to crosswise stripes, lengthwise stripes, larger or smaller areas with checks, diamonds, and zig zag lines. Figure 22 shows attempts at these kinds of checkered patterns. A number of ryas from Vestfold illustrates border patterns and a decoratively developed middle portion with

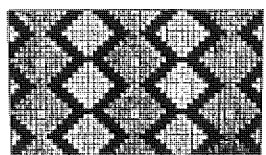
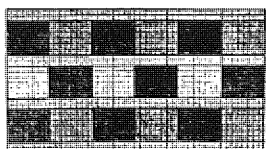
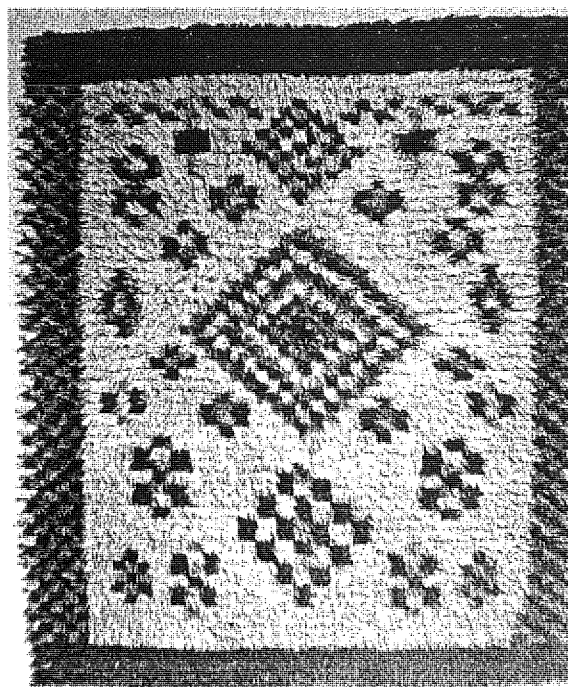


Fig 22 – Examples of checkered patterns used in rya



Rya from Vestfold

checkered motifs. In a similar manner the edge is highlighted in a couple of northern mountain ryas, plates 9, and a few times the year, a monogram, place of residence or a little figure is knotted in. That is everything. The artistic need has allowed itself to display itself so richly within the other branches of our textile art that there just has been a very limited place for something like this in the daily article of use: the rya.

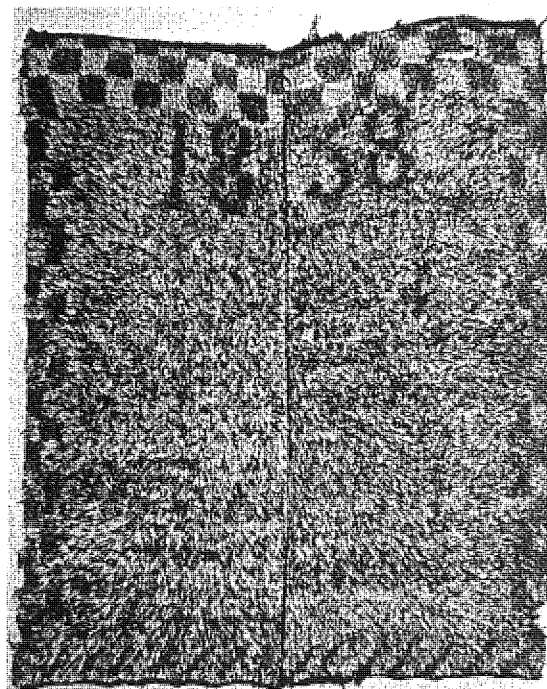


Plate 9 – Rya with date

## FOOTNOTES

### RYA, THE NORDIC PILE WEAVING.

1. same
2. Jacobsen, Jacob: Etymological dictionary of the Old Norse Language of Shetland. Copenhagen 1921.
3. Jacobsen, M.H. and Matras, Chr.: Faero-danish dictionary. Troshavn 1927-1928. It is probable that *ru* and *royta* have the same root even if it isn't directly proven.
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9. Mentioned by Agnes Geijer in connection with the Swedish pile weave from Birka.
10. Fuhman, Irmingard: The Gravefinds of Pilgrimsdorf.
11. Walterstorff, Emilie von: Textile pictorial works. Stockholm 1925, page 26.
12. See Vogt, Emil:
14. Kielland, Kristian: Ryas in Northern Norway. Röhsska Arts & Crafts Museum. Annual Report 1934, page 47.
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16. Historical-topographic documents about Norway and Norwegian parts of the country written in Norway in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Published by Gustave Storm. Christiana 1895, page 232. "About Finnmark."
17. In the year 1639 is mentioned "hollandsk ry" (Dutch ryas) in a Danish "toldliste." (duty list). See the dictionary of the older Danish language 1300-1700. Dutch ryas are mentioned in a Norwegian

estate settlement in Kristiana 1716. Government archives in Oslo.

18. Bragemes 1710. Government archives in Oslo.
19. Authored before 1786, published and edited in Copenhagen 1814.
20. Sylwan, l.c.s. page 14 & 53. Sirelius l.c.s. 9 and Anderson, Ellen: Folk Weaving in Denmark. Copenhagen 1941. See also Hald, magrethe" The Blue Bolsters. Copenhagen 1940, page 26.

### RYE WE STILL OWN

1. Ryas with a pile on both sides are known in Sweden. Here in Norway they are mentioned only once.
2. See for example: Norway's descriptions. Copenhagen 1835.
3. See: Sæland, Jon. The New Sheepbook. Oslo 1930.
4. Told to me by Mr. Christian Rekkedal. Sogn's agricultural and horticultural school.
5. Mrs. Mette Paasche Jenssen. Alstahaug.
6. See about rya weaving in the Norwegian Handcrafts Association Handbook in Weaving with Carline Halvorsen. Oslo 1934.
7. About double weave see for example: Waltersdorff, Emilie von. Textile pictorial works. Stockholm, 1925, page 8.
8. Told to me by Mr. Hans Krøvel, engineer, who comes from Ørsta, Sunnmøre.

Excerpts from **Ryas in Norway** have been printed with permission of the late Helen Engalstad's family.

### **FROM SYVILLA TWEED BOLSON** **512 LOCUST ROAD** **DECORAH, IA 52101**

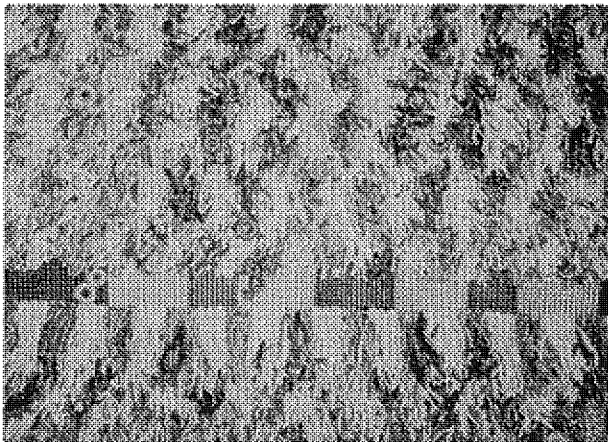
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yarns needed.



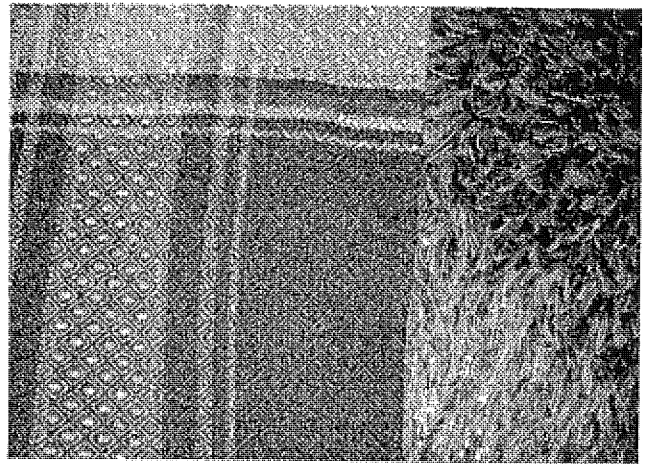
## NEW RYA STUDY GROUP FORMING!

If you are interested in Norwegian rya traditions, or contemporary expression in this time-honored technique, a new group is forming to study the subject. **Judy Ness**, textile artist and University of Oregon adjunct weaving instructor, will lead the group. Serving as advisors will be three knowledgeable and experienced researchers and weavers: **Ellen Kjellmo**, author of *Båtrya i Gammel og Ny Tid* (Boat Rya, Past and Present), **Marta Kløve Juuhl**, who addressed the 2005 Decorah conference on rya traditions in her home area of Voss, and **Betty Johannesen**, Midwestern weaving teacher with a special interest in rya.

Any Guild members who are interested in joining what promises to be a very special study group should contact Judy at [judyneess@uoregon.edu](mailto:judyneess@uoregon.edu).



Contemporary rya woven by Betty Johannesen features bands of slit tapestry in three colors. A combination of rya wool and 14/4 linen was used for the knots. Three sizes of washers were covered with linen and knotted to hang on the surface.



Replica of a rya from Voss Folk Museum, woven by Marta Kløve Juuhl. Marta will serve as an advisor to the new Rya Study Group. (The original Voss rya is pictured in Fig. 9.28 of *The Woven Coverlets of Norway*.)

## NORWEGIAN TEXTILE GUILD MEETING AT CONVERGENCE 2006 GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN

If you are going to Convergence in Grand Rapids this summer, be sure to attend the Norwegian Textile Guild meeting. Kay Larson will give a presentation on plans for the 2007 Textile Study Tour to Norway and Sweden arranged by Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum. The theme of the tour will be A Common Thread: Norwegian and Swedish Weaving Traditions. The NTG meeting will be held on Friday, June 30 at noon, location to be announced. Please bring your lunch and join us!

*Norwegian Textile Letter*  
Vol. 12, No. 2 February 2006

# NORWEGIAN TEXTILE LETTER

Vol. XII No. 3

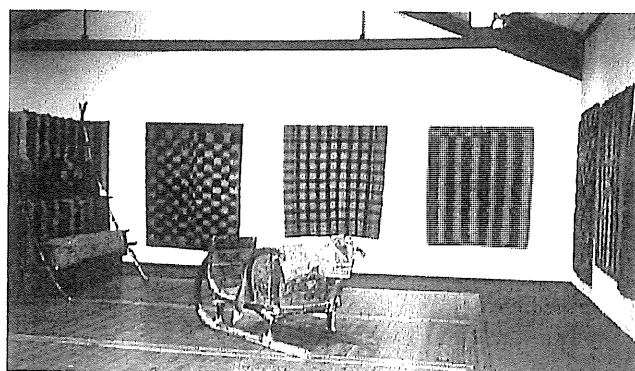
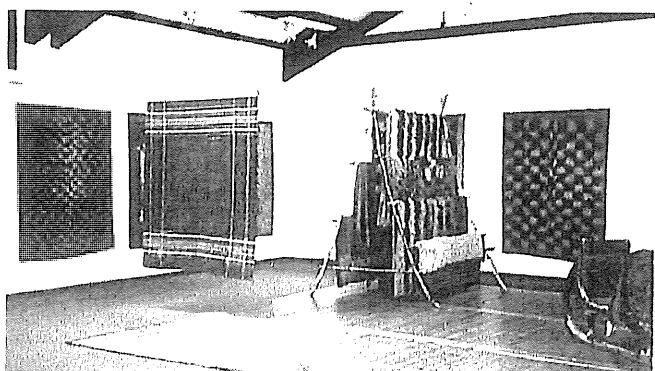
May, 2006

## Voss Ryer – Traditional Bedcover and Contemporary Art

by Marta Kløve Juuhl

*Keynote Presentation at the Conference on Norwegian Woven Textiles  
October, 2005*

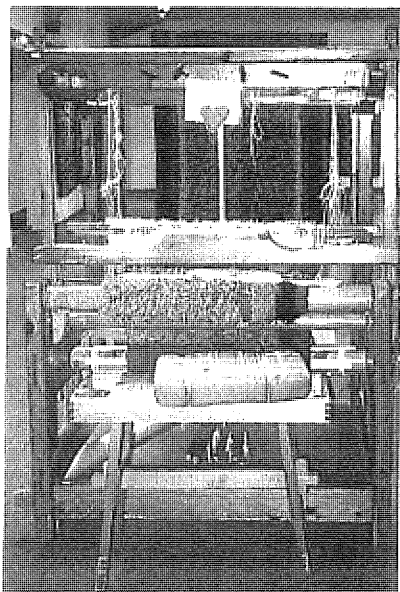
Three years ago, Voss Folkemuseum had a great exhibition on *ryer* (pile coverlets) a traditional textile in Voss for the last 200 or 300 years. Voss is situated in western Norway, not along the coast though; it's inland. Through the local newspaper the museum asked the inhabitants to borrow *ryer* (I will use the Norwegian word) for the exhibition. They got about 70, mostly from the farms in the district.



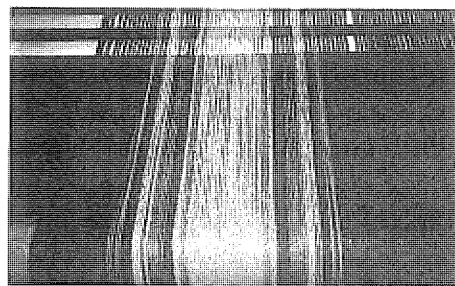
*Voss Folkmuseum exhibit 2002*

And I was asked to be a part of the exhibition, so to speak. They wanted me to put up a loom in the museum's great hall and sit there and weave during the summer of 2002. Of course I accepted that invitation, partly because I am a weaver and partly because I grew up in a farm in Voss where we have quite a few of these old *ryer*. I felt I could contribute to the exhibition in that way.

*Marta's  
loom*



*Warp with  
black,  
blue,  
orange  
and green  
thread*



I will describe:

1. The development of Voss *ryer* – from sheepskins to a woven textile.
2. Traditions in use.
3. How to make *ryer*.
4. The variety of design.
5. Inspiration for making new *ryer*.

## 1. The development of Voss ryer – from sheepskins to a woven textile

In the early houses, consisting of only one room with an open hearth, there were low benches made of earth along the walls. The earthen benches were used to lie on. Sheepskins were then used as blankets, both over and underneath the people when they slept. Later on these skins were replaced by the ryer and plain blankets made of wool.

Today of course, we realize that the ryer were based on the sheepskin idea, or perhaps you could say that they were inspired by them.

Sheep-farming has long traditions in the Voss rural area, so there was certainly never any shortage of the skins there. Weaving took time, and it was intricate, so it was not a savings of work when the sheepskins went out of fashion for bedding. Besides, they had plenty of other uses for the skins, such as for clothing.

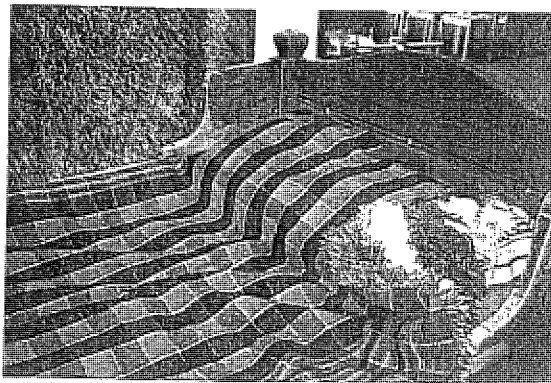
It was found to be more beneficial to shear the sheep in spring and autumn than to slaughter them. The ryer were much more pleasant to use, and they were easier to keep clean than the sheepskins. A rye can stand a good washing.

But still they were not so clean all the time. I have heard a story about a girl who was engaged to a farmer's son, and when she came to the farm to stay overnight for the first time, she was placed in bed with a dirty old rye. I don't think she considered that a warm welcome. I don't know if they ever got married.

## 2. Traditions in use

The majority of the farms have a separate outside building, called a *loft*, where the valuables of the family were stored. This is where there were chests with the silver and other precious items. This is also where their best clothing was hung to air, and where their tapestries, ryer and woollen blankets were kept.

The servant girls slept in the loft on summer nights – no doubt under the colourful ryer. Beds were to be found in the living rooms of the farms, too. Because beautiful woven articles gave a certain status, people began to adorn the beds with ryer and coloured woollen blankets, to show to their visitors and families.



*Bed with rye coverlet*

On cold winter days, the ryer were used on the open horse-drawn sleighs, to keep the travellers warm. And when the rye was too old for anything else it was used on the horse's back on cold winter days.

One of my parents' friends, an old lady, told me a story about when her family's rye was stolen. This was in the 1930s when the farmers still used horses when they need to go into Voss *sentrum* (city center). They were invited to a Christmas party on a very cold winter's day. They felt sorry for the horse who had to wait outside the house for them. So they put the warmest and most precious thing they had on its back, the rye. When they returned after the party, the rye had been stolen. The farmer's wife never made another rye.

Voss is not close to the coast, so using ryer in boats was not a topic here. But the fishermen in northern Norway used to use ryer in boats. And when speaking of ryer to common Norwegians today, they think of *båtryer* (boat ryer).

In some districts in Norway they have also used rags as the nap or pile, but we have no documentation for that in the Voss area. That

is the same with initials and numbers; I have never seen them on ryer from Voss.

### 3. How to make ryer

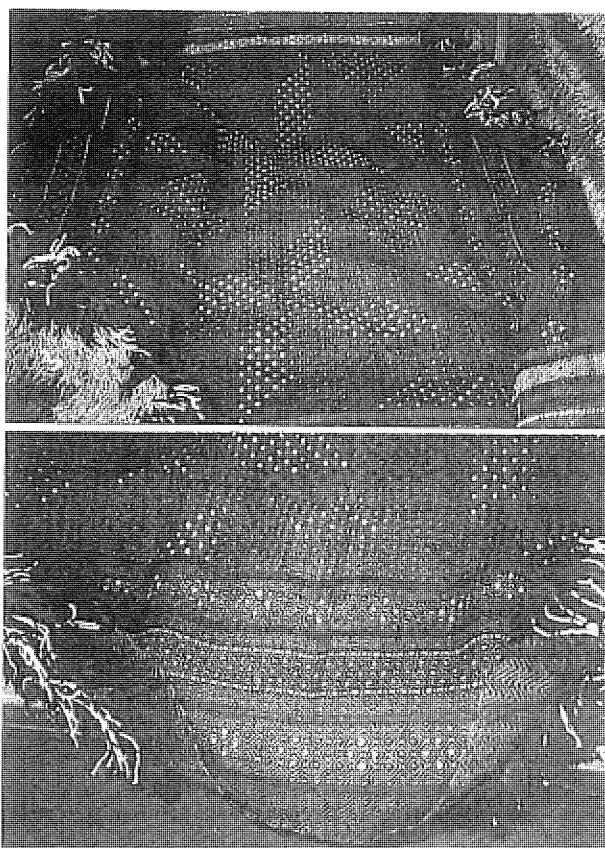
Voss ryer consist of a loom-woven blanket and a nap, or pile, rug. I will use the word nap to describe the loose yarns hanging down; they are 5 – 8 cm long. Two different weaving techniques are combined to make into one rye. While the blanket (you may also call it the bottom) is woven, the nap is knotted into it simultaneously. Thus the rye has a smooth side and a nap side.

The ryer are woven in woollen yarn, both in warp, weft and nap. In bygone days the looms were narrower than today, so the majority of the ryer are woven in two widths of approximately 70 – 75 cm, and then sewn together down the middle.

The weaving technique is diamond twill on four harnesses and four treadles, and the pile knot is almost always placed right in the middle of the diamond. Sometimes you can see the pile knots on the smooth side just as decorative spots, but I think it is most common that they are not shown.

There are two different knots which are used. When the knots are not to be shown, you tie the yarn (nap) around just one thread of the warp on each side of the diamond centre. This knot is called Turkish knot. The other type is knotted sideways around the three warp threads right in the middle of the diamond. If you have both types of knots in the same row, you put the knots that are not to be shown on the top of the diamonds.

The smooth side of the rye is the right side, the side you see when the rye is placed on the bed. But just the same, it is most important for the weaver to know exactly where and how to tie the pile knots, because these form the pattern on the reverse side of the rye. It was, and still is, important that the rye be decorative on both sides. It is the geometric shapes which are repeated, and there are also squares, stripes and bands.



*Knots tied around 3 warp ends make a pattern on the smooth side of rye blanket*

In Norway, weaving, as far as we know, has always been women's work. I think this is the reason why so little is written about weaving. It has always been a part of the silent knowledge passed on from mother to daughter.

When it comes to ryer, this is the reason why we know so little about the phenomena of using two different types of knots in our district. It occurs on the ryer that are about 100 years old, in just a small area. Let us imagine there was a farmer's wife using her creativity in weaving. She wanted to do something special and discovered that the knots could be tied in different ways. One day the women of the neighbouring farms visited her, looked at her weaving, and picked up the idea.

Because I am familiar with Voss ryer it was an unexpected experience to discover that this was known in just this small area. I know my great-grandmother made several of these, but

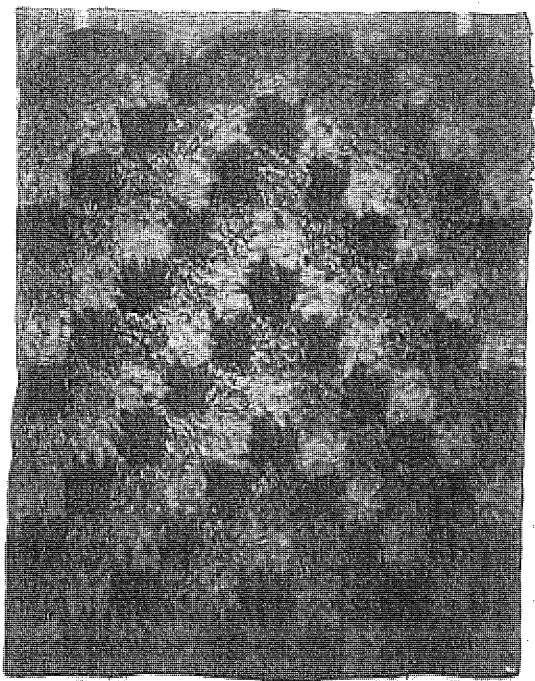
unfortunately I never met her. When I started investigating ryer, both my grandmothers and my mother were dead too, so I had nobody in the family to ask.

#### 4. The variety of design

All the ryer that I have seen in Voss and Hardanger are in diamond twill weave, although I know that elsewhere in Norway other weaving techniques are used. And most of them have bright colours both in warp, weft, and nap.

Red and black seem to be a common colour combination, though the oldest ones I have seen (from the beginning of the 1800s) are often just black and white, the natural colours from sheep's wool. But almost all colours were used, even pink and turquoise, bright blue and green.

The design is often a very intricate combination of nap and bottom or blanket, especially when some of the knots make patterns on both sides. Then the nap is very often black in the middle with just a few spots of bright blue, green and yellow. If there is a frame of the colours then the warp is usually black with a few stripes on each side and the weft is red.



*Rye woven in squares of red, black and tan.*

Older ryer have the nap in small squares 10 times 10 cm in red and black or orange and black. Sometimes you can see that the weaver did not have enough yarn of the right colour for the nap. Then she had to dye more yarn, and she did not get quite the same shade. So half of the rye is green and the other half is turquoise. Still it is very beautiful to look at, and I guess the utility was the same. The old ryer show a brilliant combination of beauty and utility.

The textiles may have a few mistakes seen through our eyes today, but the mistakes did not reduce the qualities for the use. I think that is good, because together with age they are part of the exotic and outstanding expressiveness which is rare in new textiles.

#### 5. Inspiration for making new ryer

Do we need such textiles today? And how can we use them? Of course we don't need ryer today, when it comes to basic survival. In our beds we have all kinds of duvets, blankets, sheets, and pillows. The fishermen along the Norwegian coast don't have open boats any more; they want a more comfortable life when they are out in their fishing boats. We hardly have any working horses left at all, and we don't put ryer on tractors. So they are not necessities that our everyday life depends on.

But still, I think we need such textiles because:

1. they tell us about our past,
2. they tell us about using what you have of raw materials, and
3. they tell us about not being afraid of working hard for a long time with a textile which is important to you.

I have great respect for the women who made these intricate patterns by combining colours and techniques. Why should we not have a rye in our bed? When we find ryer as contemporary textiles they are mostly on the walls.

I guess some of you have read about another of our textile artists, Inger Anne Utvåg, in the *Norwegian Textile Letter*. She also uses old båttryer (boat ryer) as inspiration for her new textiles, which are large ryer as wall hangings. As such they have a powerful emanation. When they change place from bed to wall, one may also change the material to be of a more exclusive kind. And suddenly they become a piece of art.

I myself put in some silk in my ryer when I find that suitable. I've made several small ryer for babies. You may wrap the babies in it, and when the baby grows and starts crawling, this rye with its nap is a very interesting subject to investigate.

One of my dreams is to get a library with lots of good books and a cozy chair with a rye in it. Perhaps one day in future I will have time to weave the rye.

So with these I consider myself making contemporary textiles, standing in a 200 to 300 year-old tradition. But after visiting the Egyptian Museum in Cairo some weeks ago I have to think in another way. Among all the mummies and chests and sculptures I also found some linen fabric, dirty and dusty and partly in bits and pieces, all placed in showcases.

In one of them I discovered something that looked very much like a rye. It was about 90 cm wide, 2 m long, and quite worn out some places. There I saw the bottom, which was tabby, and for each 16 or 17 mm there was a row of Turkish knots. Where the floss still existed it was about 6 or 7 cm long; both the bottom and the nap were linen. I don't know anything about the use of this textile because there was no information except for the age, about 3,000 years old. So now I suddenly find myself in a 3,000 to 4,000 year-old tradition. That gives weaving of ryer, and weaving in general, a certain perspective.

Why should we stop now? I decided to end my lecture like this before I left Norway, and I was kind of pessimistic when thinking about

the weaving back home. But I want weaving so much to continue.

And so I arrive here in Decorah and meet all of you who are so enthusiastic and full of energy and busy weaving. That you are very skilled I can see from the exhibit "Frisk og Flink." And what I hear of the study groups that you have in many places also gives me that impression. So you give me the energy to keep on back home. Thank you.

\*\*\*\*\*

## What I Did on My Winter Vacation

by Laurann Gilbertson and Kay Larson

Is March still winter? It certainly was in Norway and Sweden this year. We met up with Ingebjørg Monsen in Lillehammer to do some scouting for the 2007 Textile Study Tour. It was snowy and cold, but very interesting and we can't wait to return in warmer weather with all of you.

Laurann: Less than an hour after getting off the plane we visited Kristin Lindberg at her home and studio in eastern Hallingdal. Kristin is an art weaver with a strong appreciation for handicraft. Her work is a fascinating blend of traditional geometric and pictorial tapestry, but with slits for effect and damask-like color choices. We're thrilled that a weaver whose work has been exhibited internationally will be one of our teachers. The topic? Art weaving.

In Lillehammer we met with the director of Maihaugen, who quickly agreed to bring out some of the museum's fantastic old cushion covers for us to study in 2007. They have a large number of pieces in *halvfloss*, a relative of *rye*, but with only the decorative motifs in pile. *Halvfloss* is the second class, and will be taught by Ingebjørg Monsen. Some of you will already know her from the 2003 and 2005 Textile Study Tours and the Conference on Norwegian Woven Textiles.

We also visited Anne Grete Stuksrud, a retired husflid consultant. Always the

# ***NORWEGIAN TEXTILE LETTER***

Vol. XIII No. 1

November, 2006

## **Excerpted from *BÅTRYA i gammel og ny tid***

*by Ellen Kjellmo*

*translated by Lorraine Leftwich*

### **FORWARD**

To survive next to an unpredictable sea under a heavy sky has made many special demands on people's creativity and ability to think and act with nature as a partner. It didn't benefit to fight the elements but rather learn to live with them and utilize the advantages nature had to offer.

Along the northern Norwegian coast people for generations have utilized the sea's possibilities as workplace, as navigable route and as food supplier. Life's sustenance lies in the seas generosity and in the yield a little farm under looming mountains could give.

The culture, which became characteristic in these districts has certainly, first and foremost, acquired its trait from people's fundamental needs. The need for beauty in the form of decoration and decorative display developed secondarily.

A general tendency during the time seems to be that one has one's eyes opened up to the values which have root in a tradition one can build further on. It seems to be a need to know where ones "roots" are to be found and what they consist of. Such realization gives security, strength and identity. Many believe that this is one of mans biggest needs today. Maybe it comes from the alienation which has sunk in with centralization and mechanical production of all our consumer wares. Also a factor in this context is the separation between children and their elders which has found a place in families.

### **Part 1 Historical overview**

#### **Introduction**

There are differing definitions of what a *rye* is, The Norwegian encyclopedia defines the concept as "woven coverlet of wool, with one side covered by tufts in one or several colors, the other side smoothly woven most often in 3 or 4 shaft weave".

Ivar Åsen describes *rye* as "a thick, woolen bed cover with tufts or a nap woven in" and he defines the expression "come under the rye" as to get in bed.

U.T. Sirelius, who has done a major work concerning Finnish *rye*, characterizes *rye* as a bed cover where the technical components are warp, weft and tufts. The last named is comprised of short ends of thread fastened to the warp in regular order, either on the top alone or on both sides.

### About the words *rye*, *ru*, *ruv*, *ry*

The word *rye* can possibly have its origin in the word *ru* or *ruv* but for the time being there is no scientific proof. In my dialect *ru* means confirmed by Johan Hveding in his Håloygske dictionary: "Ru(noun) poor wool, wool clipped in the spring, winter wool.

Other related words from Northern Norwegian dialects can also have something to do with *rye*:

*Rua*: to clip winterwool off, *Ru*: (adj). Small tufted. The man is tufted on the chin where the new beard growth has sprouted out and *Rufl*, *ruffel*: small clusters sticking up. (Hveding 1968).

In certain Northern Norwegian dialects the word occurs also in the context to dip oneself. To spin *ry* means to spin yarn into *rye* tufts.

In her research from 1942, Helen Engelstad refers to the Shetland and Færoe languages. The words *ru* and *royta* occur here in the context of shearing the sheep in the spring when they shed. Linguist Carl J.S. Marstrander ascribes a Norwegian origin to the Irish word *ru*, the expression signifies a coarser coverlet, corresponding to fur. He believed the word had come to Ireland with the Vikings.

In a Danish folk tune the expression "*ligge paa Ru*" (lie on a *rye*) occurs, and in Swedish folk tales such phrases such as to "*ligge under roghe*" (lie under a *rye*). Both of these expressions Vivi Sylwan believes refers to the use of a shaggy coverlet

From the definition one would therefore believe that there is a relationship among the words *ru*, *ry*, *rufl* etc., and that it would have to do with shagginess.

And this is exactly the character of a *rye*. It is a woven, shaggy coverlet where one must differentiate between the two sides. The smooth side which was the right side and turned up, and the tufted side which was down toward the body and considered the wrong side.

Which side should be considered the right side has been the subject of discussion. But from the fact that the hems turn away from the smooth side and the sewing together of the woven widths is done on the tufted side, and from older people's statements, that is considered proof that the smooth side was the right side.

Because there are different kinds of shaggy coverlets and weavings, one needs to be more specific in definition. The different types of weavings can be grouped into two major types:

1. Weavings where the tufts appear because of shaggy wool or loose ragged material.
2. Weavings where the tufts are knotted in a ground weave.

It is in this last group that one finds boat *rye*. Other weavings for example, boat greener, åklær and other forms of bed coverings in beds or boats aren't included here.

Of *rye* with tufts, there are two main types: *Sliterye* (working *rye*), and *prydrye* (decorative *rye*). This book is about the coarse and modest *rye*. In short, the large, heavy *rye* which fishermen used to keep warm in the boat or shanty in the wintertime.

### **Dear children have many names**

*Rye* have many names and dear was the one which survived under harsh conditions in a boat, shanty or bed. In Vesterålen, they are called *Lofotrya* because it was mainly in Lofoten that they were used. *Grårya* (gray), *sliterya* (worn), *Napparya* (nappy) are other names. In Lofoten, the names boat *rye* or just *rye* are used.

Since I place the most emphasis on those *rye* which come originally from Lofoten or Vesterålen, they will be called boat *rye* or just *rye* here.

Much of the preserved material from other parts of the country has never been in a boat, so can't be considered boat *rye*. They are also called just *rye*. *Rye* were commonly used as bedding in the household. One can understand this from estate records and from registration offices in connection with estates in bankruptcy. Often the estates tell where the *rye* was registered, for example, in the house attic, storage house loft, in the storage room.

## HISTORY OF RYE

In 1942, Helen Engelstad documented thoroughly the occurrences of *rye* in a historical perspective based upon written material. As far as I know there are no new archeological finds which would cast further light on *rye*'s oldest history, and I mention therefore only a summary of this background material.

Sheepskin coverlets have been common bed coverings up until this century. There must have been a reason for them to be replaced by something close to the sheepskin's qualities and appearance. The basis could have been the sheepskins weaknesses relative to use in a wet climate. In an open boat where one must anticipate that it was not easy to remain dry, the sheepskin pelt had obvious flaws. It dried slowly and the hide became hard and stiff after drying. With washing, the sheepskin had the same flaws. However, boat *rye* could be washed and dried and continue to be just as good and user friendly.

## Nordic perspective

A question which arises when one is faced with a cultural phenomenon is whether it is something which has arisen in our culture, brought about by our special need and out of the resources available to satisfy that need. Access to appropriate material will be a factor when it concerns boat *rye*, the question is whether it can be a "strange bird" from the Far East where the tapestry tradition is quite old.

Neither theory can be proven or disproven based on the historical research which prevails today. But both U.T. Sirelius and Vivi Sylwan, who have researched the Finnish and Swedish *rye* respectively, are of the opinion that the oriental and nordic *rye* can be parallel phenomena. The knot, which is the same in both tapestry traditions, is so simple that it could have appeared in several places in the world independently of each other.

According to Sylwan and Sirelius the oriental tradition was introduced in Europe in the 1300's where it quickly developed into its own European tapestry art. This later became the inspiration for the Finnish, Swedish and Norwegian decorative *rye*, they believe.

Helen Engelstad in the meantime places a question mark by Sylwan and Sirelius conclusion. She believes that just as tatting and cardweaving could have spread over large geographic areas in prehistoric times, so could *rye* weaving.

All research takes it for granted that new inventions come to us, not the reverse. When the need was there and the material was accessible, it's then not unbelievable that we also have been in a position to find solutions to our special needs without getting them from outside sources. And if anyone should have the need to devise something warm, it must have been people in our climate. One wonders whether we so easily renounce our forefathers and mothers ability to solve practical problems because of low national self-esteem. Our seamen were independent, long distance travelers, explorers and navigators. Along the Western route they explored and along the eastern route they fought their way over Russia's rivers and lakes until they ended up far into Asia. Is it so unbelievable that one or two wool threads were along for the trip?

Because Professor Marstander believes that the Irish word *ru* has Norwegian origin, *rye* weaving must have occurred in Norway in Viking times. This is before the influence from Oriental tapestries could have had an impact. On several points the

Norwegian boat *rye* and other everyday use *rye* differentiate themselves clearly from oriental tapestries. Boat *rye* are woven on more than a two shaft ground, the knot rows are not visible on the smooth side, there are several weft rows between each knotted row, and it is probable that the smooth side is considered the right side. The Norwegian *rye* are, because of the weaving technique, softer and suppler than oriental tapestries. The tufted side in boat *rye* do not distinguish themselves with patterns and symbols, and the tufts are long and lie flat.

The idea that one can create a coverlet in this way with furs warming properties, comes exactly from sheepskin pelts. *Rye* can be considered without a doubt an imitation pelt. The Swedish researcher Linnè had this in mind when he described *rye* as "artificially produced pelts."

The preserved *rye* material in Norden goes back to the 1600's. Sirelius found an example from this time when he examined Finnish *rye*. Surely *rye* existed before that. Sylvan refers to convent rules at Vadstena Kloster, written between 1487 and 1496, where it is written about the sister's beds "they have a cloth over them of white homespun and in addition a *rye* and pelt of sheepskin during the winter."

It is hardly believable that the modest sisters in the convent had newly invented, modern bedcoverings on their beds. Therefore one can believe rightly so that *rye* weaving is a very old phenomenon in Norden.

During the 1500's one finds evidence in Latin dictionaries from this time where the Latin word *gausape* is translated as "a ragged cloth like a *rye*."

According to Sylvan, with excavation of a boat grave from the 700's in Valsgærde in Vaksal, a couple of textile fragments in twill where the one side was covered in tufts were found, and in a grave in Birka in Sweden a similar fragment was found from around 900 AD.

We also don't know with certainty when *rye* weaving became customary here. That is the same with

women's culture in general. The knowledge sneaked its way in through the kitchen, and first became known after it became a part of the daily routine.

### **Other findings that cast light on *rye* history.**

In Pilgrimsdorf in East Prussia, a gothic prince's grave from 3-400 AD was found which contained pieces of tufted weaving and twill. This could have been a coverlet the dead was wrapped in. In addition, Vivi Sylvan sees a connection between bronze age clothing where tufted weaving occurred as imitation fur. This has to do with what linguists have concluded. Hvalmar Falk translates the Icelandic word "*roggvarfeldr*" as "tufted cloak or cape."

### **Occurrences of *rye* in Norway**

In Norway, the research of old deeds and cadasters (manorial books) has cast some light on the occurrence of *rye*.

In 1440 a *rye* was used among other things as method of payment for a chest in Sogn. From the 1500's one is enlightened through entries in estate and inheritance settlements together with farm repossessions.

Mrs. Inger of Østråt and Mr. Vincent Lunge complained about having *rye* and other bedcoverings taken from them by Olav Engebretsons people in 1527-32.

From the inventory list in monasteries one understands that *rye* were part of the furnishings. Helen Engelstad depicts the occurrence of *rye* in Trøndelag as very common in the 1500's. At Bergenhus fortress *rye* are enumerated in the accounts from 1518, and from the same time period they are discussed at Akershus. The 1600's archive material is copious. From this time forward the information is more detailed.

In 1934, Kristian Kielland researched estate settlements and auction records in Møre, Trøndelag and northern Norway and sampled where *rye*

occurred. With this as a background he worked out a statistical overview of the total *rye* on 10 farms. The occurrence of *rye* were quite numerous at Helgeland with 35 whole *rye* for 10 farms in the 1700's. He found just 5 which were made in ca. 1800. In Lofoten and Vesterålen he found 7 *rye* on 10 farms from the 1660-80 time period, 23 from 1700, 16 from 1750 and 7 from 1800. In Salten, Kielland found 7 from the 1700's and 2 from the 1800's. Furthermore, from the survey it appears that the occurrence of *rye* had declined toward 1900. Now of course this was research based on random sampling. It isn't said what kind of farms these are, if they were so called combined use or owned farms, large farms or small. Such issues can influence his research. Despite this, this survey shows that *rye* were abundant in the coastal districts where fishing was the source of livelihood.

Helen Engelstad's research, which encompasses the national archive in Oslo and Kristiansand and research of inheritance records from Østfold, Akershus, Vest-Agder, leads to a widening of Kielland's conclusions. From her conclusions, *rye* were abundant throughout the whole country, including inland. Inland *rye* are exclusively bed or sled *rye*. Several of our preserved *rye* have loops sewn on them which enables them to be fastened to a sled. Helen Engelstad has done in depth work and describes these *rye* from a geographical standpoint. I don't feel the need to reexamine her work.

In Northern Norway, the impression is that *rye* have been in everyday use as furnishings in boats, shanties and beds. In 408 records from Astafjord, Ibestad, 17 *rye* are mentioned between 1753 to 1800. One grasps the idea of how many *rye* there could be. But in the same records "*Rye-Nap*" are also mentioned, yarn already clipped into tufts for knotting.

Also from vektangivelser, one must presume that *rye* with tufts, *napparyer* are mentioned. During the period 1850-1900 the records from Astafjord don't mention *rye*. It can appear that already at this point the weaving of *rye* has stopped. One doesn't know the reason for this.

In Øksnes municipality, the records from 1753- 1800 give information about 42 *rye*. In the period 1850-1900 one finds 87 *rye* in all. 14 of these *rye* can be characterized as old, but only 4 are considered new. During this time one finds many *rye* banished to the dark attic or to the woodshed.

Another interesting clarification these records give is that where there are several *rye* spoken of in the records, they are most likely from the home of a transport ship captain or merchant. It confirms what we have seen from other places, that *rye* have been furnishings in local boats. It can also be that in such homes there were often servants, the need for bed coverings was large, and therefore maidservants could take part in the enormous work it was to produce *rye*. Where *rye* found themselves inside the home tells us also that it wasn't only "sailors" who had *rye* on their beds.

In a record from Øksnes, a *rye* is named which at that registration period was found in Eidsfjord. Could it have been along on a fishing trip there? We know that this fjord is known as a place abundant in fish.

From the 1850's onward, sources are somewhat more detailed such that one has *rye* which have survived the ravages of time and can to a certain extent tell its own story. Besides, one has people who can tell about *rye* and of the *rye* as a known article for everyday use.

Apart from one *rye* from Grytøya Bygdetun I don't have any knowledge of preserved *rye* in Tromsø and Finnmark. One must presume they went missing in World War II.

In Lofoten and Vesterålen many *rye* are found today in private ownership and in museums. Most farmsteads and museums have several *rye* in their collections, so the *rye* tradition has without a doubt been strong in the coastal districts of the northern most counties.

According to written sources *rye* weaving ended at the end of the 19th century. I believe that there is

documented proof that *rye* weaving continued in Lofoten well into this century.

In Kjerschow Zahl and his wife Anna Elisabeth's estate at old Kjerringøy commercial center in the year 1900, there were 22 *rye* and 25 sheepskin pelts. Clearly at that time *rye* were already being displaced by fine bed coverings. In just a few workers rooms were there still *rye* on the beds. I will cover these *rye* in their own section later in the book.

At the Folk Museum at Bygdøy one finds 6 *rye* from Northern Norway.

Sunnmøre museum in Ålesund owns over 40 *rye*. These are exclusively from Sunnmøre. Two *rye* are dated from before 1850 while all of the rest are dated at the end of the 1800's. None are after 1900. This strengthens the impression that the *rye* lost their popularity at the turn of the century.

At the Nordenfjord Arts and Crafts museum in Trondheim are found 6 *rye* which are all dated from the 1800's. One of these comes from Helgeland, 2 are of unknown origin, but 2 come from Orkdalen in Sør Trøndelag.

Many *rye* find themselves in private ownership. Today the old, worn *rye* are valuable heirlooms. They are so desirable that several of them have been divided into its two widths and distributed among the heirs. Several are preserved as valuable gems in collectors possessions spread around the country. With emigration, *rye* have also found their way to America.

During World War II, when the shortage of materials was great, many *rye* were turned over to woolen goods factories for recycled wool. This was used for knitted coverlets or fill for mattresses. One delivered wool scraps to the factory, and received fabric, yarn or recycled wool in return. In this manner a good number of *rye* were unwittingly lost for eternity.

## Norway's oldest *rye*

Norway's oldest *rye* with definite dating belongs to Vefsn community in Mosjøen. This *rye* piece has the year 1681 knotted into the tufted side. The *rye* is from Kulstadåsen in Vefsn where it has been passed down through generations there. The *rye*, which is woven in four shaft diagonal twill, has knotted rows of tufts with approximately 1 cm in between. The pattern on the smooth side is red stripes on a green ground with an imitation diamond effect because of two inlays of red yarn at regular intervals. On the tufted side the pattern is large squares on point in green and sheep black with an outline of a light gray color which was originally red. The same color is repeated in the center of each diamond. The year is knotted in red doubled yarn against black background. The preserved *rye* piece is 68 cm wide in woven width and 67 cm long. Surely this is a piece of a larger *rye* since on both ends there are loose warp threads. But there is not a trace of this piece being sewn together with another. Apart from the fact that the pattern is different on each selvage edge one would think that it was joined with another woven piece. The *rye* is tangibly more worn on one side, so it is believable that it was of the usual size, and that the second width is very simply worn out and has disappeared. The material is 2 ply wool yarn in the warp, weft, tufts.

Both materially and in weaving technique the Vefsn *rye* contains well known characteristics: twill, tufted knots, several weft rows between the knotted rows, and woven of wool yarn of differing qualities is typical for the yarn we know from Northern Norway. Yes, the tufted yarn's twist direction, left (S) spinning and right (Z) plying are well known.

## Other *rye*

Apart from the Vefsn *rye* from 1681 we know very little of how the *rye* of this time period appeared. It is initially in the inheritance records from the 1700's that we get information about how *rye* appeared. In the previously mentioned records from Øksnes in Vesterålen and from Astafjord the terms "striped,

black and white striped, brown and white", for example, appear. First of all, it gives information on which colors and shapes were common, but they also speak to which side was considered the important, namely the smooth side. It is this side which is mentioned. This also must have been the right side.

Which weaving technique was used was not mentioned, but colors seemed to have importance. In the records from the 1700's in Øksnes only natural sheep colors are named such as black, white and gray. However, in Astafjord we find "nearly new blue stripes, blue and white stripes, new red striped, yellow striped."

### Dye stuff

At this time aniline dyes had not been discovered, so natural dyes were the norm. Our most common dye stuffs give yellow color tones. Leaves from birch, heather and lichen species give good and colorfast yellow colors. For blue and red color tones today one uses indigo, krapp and cochineal. These dye stuffs are not found naturally in our flora here and must be imported from warmer climates. It is therefore possible that the red and blue color spoken of here must have come from plants which exist in our flora.

When it concerns blue dyestuff, we believe it comes from woad. Woad, *Isatis tinctoria*, is a semiannual herb in the cruciate family. It has yellow flowers, grows to 1-1.5m. high and grows along the entire coast up to Finnmark. Some blue dyestuff was known already in Viking time. Queen Åse had a box of woad seed with her in the Oseberg ship. She couldn't in any circumstance be without blue in her royal clothing.

It is the leaves from the woad plant which contain a glucose where the dye stuff is bound to a carbohydrate. This dyestuff is freed through a fermentation process. The blue color is then released. The fermented leaf mass is then formed into balls, dried, then ground to a fine powder. This is used for dyeing. Yes, it definitely was a commodity. The blue color does not dissolve in water. But together

with fermented urine the color dissolves and in this mixture the yarn is dyed. In oral tradition the color was known as pot blue. And the pot was the old familiar one under the bed.

For the red colors we find just two plants which could have been used: marsh cotton, *Galium broeale*, and *korke* lichen. From marsh cotton, the thin root stalks were gathered, dried, ground and used for dyeing. It is said that one had to have more root than yarn to get a good red. It is therefore no surprise that the plant was almost extinct toward the end of the 1800's.

*Korkelichen*, which grows like a whitish, somewhat uneven, grainy crust on rocks and birch trunks was a much used substance for red color too. The lichen was scraped from rocks with a knife, thereafter dried, pulverized, and fermented in urine. During this fermentation process a red dyestuff, *orseille*, is extracted which was used to dye wool yarn and clothing. Fermented lichen was formed into cakes, dried and then ground into a fine powder. Together with fermented urine this dye gave a beautiful red color to yarns and woolens. Fermented lichen cakes were, in fact, an export until the end of the 1700's.

The procedure for dyeing with *korke* lichen was described by Christian Jensøn in 1646. Urine from humans was a valuable resource in connection with dyeing.

A large dye center on the continent was famous for its dye industry, and a regular practice in this process was to gather in the residents urine output. Monschau in Germany is a small city known for its dye industry. Much of the dye process was based on people's urine plus dyestuff which could have been lichen, woad, indigo among others.

Also yellow striped/brown striped rye are named in the records. Without doubt, the plants referred to are from our own flora.

One dyestuff which gives colorfast color and moreover is easy to dye with is gray *farge* lichen, *Parmelia saxatilis*. This lichen species grows all over

the country In the coastal districts there is a lot of it and it is an especially powerful dye here. In wet conditions it loosens from the stone, and it is therefore easy to gather in large amounts. In addition it is very easy to use to dye. The yarn doesn't need any preparation (mordanting). The lichen and yarn are layered in a dyepot, water is poured in and then one only has to warm up everything to 90 degrees and hold at that temperature for 1 hour or more. After cooling the yarn is washed and rinsed. The color intensity is dependent on the amount of lichen in relations to yarn and the dyeing time. The lichen species is mistakenly called stone lichen in the dye books. Probably it is because one finds so many kinds of lichen growing on rocks, and it isn't always easy to tell one from another.

Lichen dyed yarn, which varies from gold beige to dark brown, often appears in *rye*. One also finds other dye stuff used such as birch leaves and heather. By themselves in the old times, *rye* could have been very rich in color. So much for the smooth side.

On the tufted side, at least we believe, there has been much said about wool's natural colors but the use of scraps and warp remnants gave this side variations in material. In our time we have so easily forgotten that this is the wrong side. At exhibitions one often finds *rye* hanging with the tufted side out, while the flat side isn't offered as remarkable.

Size, weight and value: Records don't say anything about the value of *rye* in relation to size. It appears that first and foremost the *rye*'s value came from its weight and amount of wear and tear. The *rye* in Astafjord in the time period 1754-1800 vary in weight from 1 *pund* (actually 1 *bismerpund*= around 6kg) to one *vog* (=3 *bismerpund*= 17.9 kg). The most are reported to weigh 1/2 *vog*, or around 9 kg.

### **Rye weaving comes to an end**

Home production of clothing and bed coverings ended suddenly in Northern Norway in keeping with the upturn in the fishing industry and because people had more money. The industrialization of textile

production over the 1800's meant that homespun gave way to storebought goods and surely *rye* also gave way to down comforters in the homes of the well to do. In the homes of servants, in fishing boats and in shanties the use of homemade wool articles and *rye* continued for a while.

As machines took over textile work, it became common to send work to the factory to get yarn and finished fabric back. This influenced *rye* also.

With the transition to the 20th century most looms were occupied with finer weaving. The home crafts movement which was started around 1860, tried to counter the industrial influence. It was "refined" to spin and weave but not among those who had done it before. It's now the genteel who sit next to the spinning wheel and on the weaving bench and it is not *rye* these upperclass women produce.

Over the 20th century women in village communities developed embroidery and crochet patterns and knitting needles clicked in a thousand homes. In just select places were the old weaving traditions kept up. When we once again seize an interest in boat *rye*, there will be no one left to help the *rye* tell their story.

BÅTRYA i gammel og ny tid by Ellen Kjellmo, published in 1996. Translated and printed here with permission from the author.

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## **TEXTILE STUDY TOUR UPDATE AND OTHER NEWS FROM VESTERHEIM**

The Textile Study Tour to Norway and Sweden is full. It was amazing to see 21 registrations arrive in three days. The last six spots were taken within the next three weeks. Nine people are on the waiting list. Because of the strong interest in touring textile sites in Norway and Sweden, Vesterheim is seriously considering repeating the tour in 2009. Please let me know soon if you're interested in the idea of a repeat tour for the summer of 2009 and whether or not you'd

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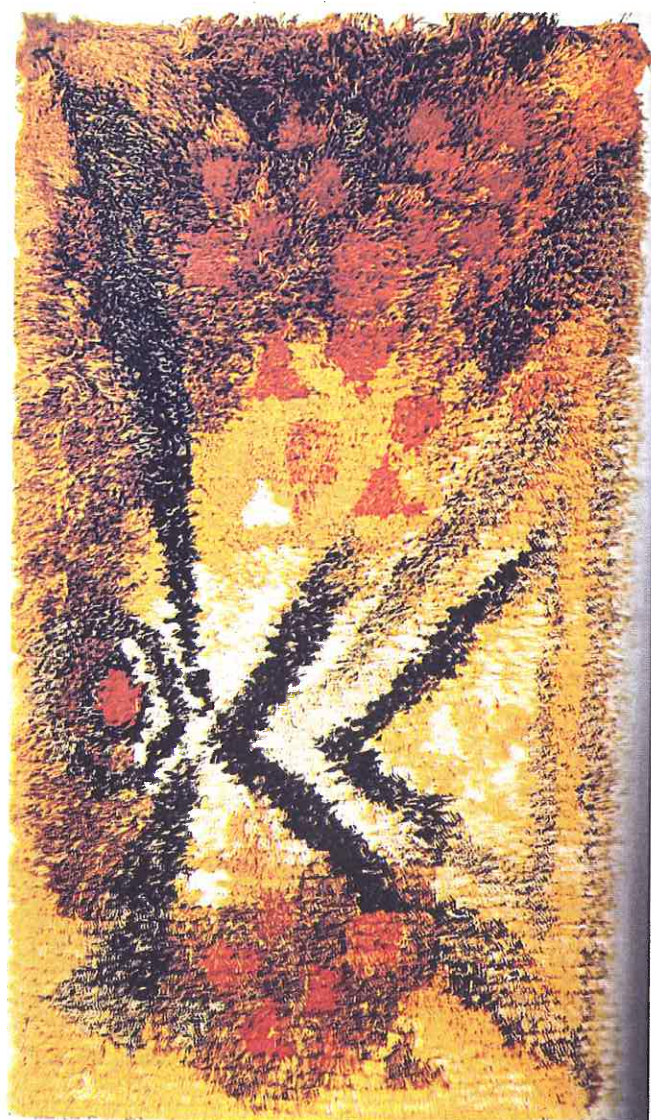
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## THE CONTEMPORARY RYA RUG IN AMERICA

by Marion T. Marzolf

presented at Conference on Norwegian Woven Textiles, Sept. 25-27, 2009 in Decorah, Iowa.

In the 1950s and 1960s rya rugs with their deep, luxurious pile, geometric and abstract designs made a big impression on the American market. Postwar American families were together again, furnishing contemporary homes and apartments that needed the warmth of colorful and modern furnishings. The arts and crafts schools were turning out new designers and craftsmen, and weavers'



"Icarus" rya rug woven by Nell Znamierowski, in *Step-by-Step Rugmaking*, NY: Golden Press, 1972, p.86. Photo courtesy of the weaver.

guilds and crafts magazines promoted handweaving as a creative leisure activity.

The times were good. Scandinavian modern furniture and furnishings, featured in department stores and modern furniture stores, became popular with the young families. Georg Jensen in New York City featured Scandinavian design and awarded prizes to the best designers beginning in 1951. The home magazines featured the new designs. Nordic countries sent traveling exhibits, including textiles, to tour the USA and build up exports. Articles and black-and-white photos of the rya rug appeared in *Craft Horizons* (founded 1981) and *Handweaver and Craftsman* (1950-1973). These magazines along with books and interviews were the major sources for this study. There were 30 articles in the two magazines about rya in the 1950s and 1960s, but only four more in the decades following.

### Background

The modern rya rug was made with the Turkish Ghiordes knot that Americans would know from Persian rugs. The same knot was also used by the Nordic countries in rya and flossa rugs for the home and in boat ryas according to fragments found as early as the 1400s. Rya and flossa are both names for the knot, but flossa is a shorter pile and woven more densely than the long-haired rya. The Nordic people first used wool of native sheep in their rya coverlets. Later they dyed the wool and added patterns. The rugs became more colorful and decorative when they were made for the manor houses and castles, and gradually appeared in the farmhouses. At the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, artists used Art Nouveau and Functionalist designs for the rya and began winning international prizes in the 1950s. Nordic designers had shifted to geometric and abstract designs by the time rya rugs were introduced abroad in traveling Scandinavian design exhibitions.

How would Americans learn about the rya technique? It's probable that some Scandinavian immigrants brought rya treasures along in their immigrant trunks, and perhaps immigrant museums have them today. But the first American handweaving instruction book, *Weaving with Foot-Power Looms*, by Edward F. Worst (1918), which relied heavily on Scandinavian immigrant weavers as sources, focused on pattern weaving for home furnishings and does not mention rya rugs.

Weaving instruction in America before World War II was available from only a few experienced weaver-teachers. It was used in occupational therapy, in Appalachia and a few craft centers, like Hartland, Michigan, that sought to revive the crafts. Mary Meigs Atwater, who became famous for her teaching and writing about weaving starting in the 1920s, mentioned in her *Shuttle-Craft Bulletin* in 1934 that readers had asked her about the pile rugs they saw in the Swedish pavilion at the Chicago Century of Progress Fair in 1933. She included rya and flossa in her Monograph 29 on rug weaving in 1948. The early weaving books of the 1950s by Atwater, Black, Gallinger, Selander, and Cyrus do contain a few pages each on the rya rug. But the major emphasis was on decorative fabrics for the home or simple clothing.

The first color photo of rya rugs turned up in this study was in Malin Selander's *Swedish Handweaving* in 1959. Weaving books of the 1960s and 1970s offered more but still mostly in black and white with some color: *Rugmaking: Techniques and Design* by Mary Allard (1963), *Rugmaking: step-by-step* by Nell Znamierowski (1972), *Techniques of Rya Knotting* by Donald J. Willcox (1971), *The Pile Weavers* by Jean Wilson (1974), a new book on rug weaving in 1984, gave detailed instructions and graphing for the rya rug. It always takes time for books to catch up with the trends.

The other major sources of information were the craft and weaving magazines which covered the field. *Craft Horizons*, founded 1941, and *Handweaver and Craftsman*, founded 1950, therefore, were important sources for this research study. All were printed in black-and-white in those years. Books and interviews were also important sources for the study.

### Rya made in America

The earliest photo of pile weaving in America that I found was a 1951 article showing Jack Lenor Larsen working on a pile rug at Cranbrook Academy of Arts in Michigan, where he said they made flossa, demiflossa, rya and flat rugs. In his memoir, Larsen pointed out that he "knotted huge Swedish-style flossa rugs for weeks on end."



"Exhibition by Larsen and Riegger Indicates Broadening Field of Craft Cooperation," in Spring 1951 *Handweaver and Craftsman*, p. 32, shows Jack Lenor Larsen at the loom weaving a rya rug.

Loja Saarinen and Marianne Strengell, the first weaving teachers at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan, were Finnish born and educated artists. The Saarinen studio produced many rugs, tapestries, and draperies for the school buildings and commissions. The school brought together master craftsmen and students in a quest for quality contemporary design for industry and studio work. Strengell pressed her students to learn the basics and strive for originality. In her own work Strengell focused on textiles, especially draperies, carpets, and upholstery. If she produced rya or flossa pieces, they have not shown up in published sources. But Cranbrook was one of the leading graduate programs in art, and its students contributed importantly to the development of modern design in 20<sup>th</sup> century America. They knew about rya and about designing for industry.

The eye-popping color cover of the May-June 1957 issue of *Craft Horizons* featured "Sunset," a dramatic red, orange, black, and grey rya rug woven by Swedish weaver Bittan Valberg, who had come to New York City in 1955 to live and work. The rug sold for \$300 and the pile was nylon. Valberg made the rug on a frame loom evenings in her hotel room while working on rug samples for DuPont at the famous studio of Dorothy Liebes. The magazine carried an article about Valberg, pointing out that her rugs had been in the Young American-Young Scandinavian exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts in New York the previous year. That show introduced her to Johanna Osborne, the chief designer at Marshal Field Company, which brought Valberg's work to Chicago.

Bittan Valberg had a brief but successful five-year career in New York. Her rya rugs were widely publicized, exhibited, and sold in the USA. She had graduated from Konstfack Art school in Stockholm and established her studio in Uppsala, where American tourists suggested she bring her rugs to America.



Rya rug "Holocaust" by Bittan Bergh Valberg being woven in her Blekinge, Sweden studio, 1957. Photo appeared in the book "Bittan Bergh Valberg" by Lena Holger, p. 26. Photo used with permission.

In May 1958 Valberg signed a contract to design a collection of area rugs to be made by Cabin Crafts of Dalton, Georgia, a company famed for chenille bedspreads. They asked her to come down and study the machines they used for chenille tufting and help them figure out how to adapt them to thicker wool and synthetic fibers for rugs. These commercial rya rugs were popular and brought the rya to a lower-priced market. (I was unable to locate a catalog or pricelist for these.) Within a couple of years, Valberg discovered exact copies of her designs on sale much cheaper by a Japanese manufacturer. Cabin Crafts said it could do nothing. Since her visa was about to expire, she returned to Sweden in 1960, where she continued her weaving career and managed a major handicrafts center in Stockholm. In the United States, other rug companies offered prizes for student designs for tufted carpets and rugs, announced in the magazines in 1972.

American artist, Nell Znamierowski, completed her four-year BFA at the Rhode Island School of Design in textiles in 1953 and went to study in Finland at the School of Industrial Design on a Fulbright Fellowship in 1955. One of her classes was rya rug design. They spent the entire first semester painting many watercolor designs until they achieved a design the professor considered successful. Then they created the color grid for weaving. Later they wove their projects. Nell wove hers at home in the USA, and she loved the technique. "It was painting with yarn." She designed, wove, and sold several ryas before producing her designs for industry. By the 1960s she was also giving lectures at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City, writing for *Handweaver and Craftsman* and *Craft Horizons*, and writing two weaving instruction books, which included rya instruction in color. She retired from FIT in 1995.

rya had become "the place where young textile designers could make the art statement." In the "Designer Craftsmen USA" (1960), which accepted only 114 pieces for a major touring show, eight were flossa and rya rugs. In the 1960s Peter Collingwood, the English rug designer who lectured and taught workshops in America on rug weaving techniques, included rya in his *The Techniques of Rug Weaving* (1969) and introduced his own corduroy rug design as an easier alternative.

For example, Urban Jupena, first allowed his rya rug to sprawl in 1968. His graduation project in 1970 was a cave rug undulating across the floor, up the wall and creating a protective ceiling arc. Jupena worked for Kidd and began his own business soon after graduation, creating one-of-a-kind sculptured rugs and other large wall pieces. Jupena took the flossa technique another step with his sculptured reliefs of the human body. He prefers flossa for sculpting because flossa rows are woven close together and the cut ends stand up straight. Jupena taught workshops on sculptured rugs, where students created a modeling clay relief contour map for the weaving and figured out from that the flossa loop lengths and positioning. He went on to head textiles at Wayne State University in Detroit, and on his last sabbatical in 2005 returned to the sculptured weaving to work through still unsolved problems with the technique.

C.U.M. (Swedish company) advertisement appeared in *Handweaver and Craftsman* magazine, January-February 1965, p. 5.

3

"Ryijy Rugs from Finland: 200 Years of a Textile Art," was created in Finland and sponsored as a major traveling exhibit for the USA and Canada by the Smithsonian Institute (SITES) in 1979. It was the last major American rya event found in the magazines in this study. Its black-and-white catalog noted that the Finnish rya had attracted world attention by winning prizes at the 9<sup>th</sup> Triennial in Milan in 1951, and succeeding exhibitions of the 1950s and 1960s. Finnish rya designs were geometric during the 1930s period of Functionalism and became more abstract and symbolic around the 1950s. With this show, Americans had an opportunity to view the two centuries of colorful rya rug development.

For a time in the 1970s and 1980s rya and flossa examples appeared in photos of wall art, dolls, bags, vests and coats, but soon they disappeared from view in the USA. Scandinavian design was being eclipsed by work from Italy and Japan.



"Cave Rug," rya installation rug woven by Urban Jupena in 1970 installed in client's home. Photo from Jupena's slide collection, courtesy of the weaver.

By the 1980s, the rya and flossa coverage in the magazines declined in America. Why the decline in interest? We may speculate. The fiber art revolution of the 1960s, when artists in Europe and America began taking weaving off the loom, gave weavers a great opportunity for creative experimentation. Fibers could be put together as free-form hanging or standing sculpture, made textural with mixed weave structures and attached objects, or wound, braided, twisted into completely new art objects. Lenore Tawney, Sheila Hicks, and Claire Zeisler led the way with new works. The shows "Woven Forms" in 1963 at the Museum of American Craft and "Art Textiles" at the Museum of Modern Art in 1968 captured attention. There was no turning back. What came to be called Fiber Art would lead the design innovations and change the field enormously.

It is difficult to track the use of rya by American handweavers today. The disappearance of photos of rya rugs in the magazines and catalogs of national shows suggests a decline of interest. The people who bought the

rya kits may have finished a rug or lost interest when they realized how many hours they would spend knotting and cutting on a rug that grew bulkier and heavier as they worked with it in their laps. A friend of mine was searching in her attic during the summer of 2008 and discovered an unfinished rya kit that she had bought years ago at a yard sale. I suspect that there are a lot more, abandoned like that. I know of no museum collections that feature rya rugs in the USA, but they ought to be included in any textile collection.

### Rya today

I was disappointed that the rya interest seemed to be over when I retired from a fulltime teaching job in 1995 and finally had time to weave. I had made one rya pillow in the 1970s and two half-rya rugs still in use. You could still find rya work in Scandinavia, but a fiber artist friend told me, "rya is passé." She wondered why I would want to spend time on it. I loved the color play and my frequent trips to Scandinavia kept rya alive for me. Good Swedish and Norwegian yarns are still available. So in 2005 I began making small rya squares and then two rya rugs, the last one for this study project.

Since trends can be revived and we are entering a new era of change in 2009, I find it hopeful that rya may revive along with the Scandinavian modern furniture classics. Jupena recently started making another sculpted flossa floor, bench, and ceiling rug for his home, inspired by the rug in the Saarinen home in Finland. Current American home furnishings catalogs show long pile (shag) solid color area rugs, bed covers, and pillows -- all factory made and inexpensive. *Handwoven* magazine only published two pieces featuring rya in recent decades: a vest in 1987 and a rya lap cover in 2003.

This study did not examine modern rya in Scandinavia, but I should mention two new books: *Rya Mattan*, by Uuve Snidare published in Swedish in 2007 that features notable rya rug designers of Sweden and Finland and *The Ryijy-Rug Lives On*, by Thomas Sopanen and Leena Willberg, which was the catalog for the show in Helsinki in summer 2009. Both books include historic and modern examples of the rugs. Rya rug kits are still available in Helsinki at the Friends of Finnish Handicraft (2009). Väv99 in Sweden mentioned an interest group of weavers seeking appropriate rya yarns.

In 2006, a rya study group was formed by the Norwegian Textile Guild.

Is a rya revival possible in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

**Marion T. Marzolf** is a retired professor of journalism and American/Scandinavian Studies at the University of Michigan. Her Swedish-born grandmother wove rag rugs and her loom is at the Le Roy Historical Museum in Michigan.

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by Marion T. Marzolf

This research was done as a part of the Rya Study Group, a sub-group of the Norwegian Textile Guild 2007-2009, by Marion T. Marzolf, professor emerita, University of Michigan. Presented in power point at Conference on Norwegian Woven Textiles, Sept. 25-27, 2009 in Decorah, Iowa.

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## TEXTILE ARTIST LAURA DEMUTH



Laura received the Gold Medal in Weaving in 2001.

Laura writes: My work in textiles began over thirty years ago when I moved to the country and acquired an eight-harness Glimåkra loom, a spinning wheel and a flock of sheep. Using handspun yarns dyed with local, natural dyes I knit and weave textiles for my home, family and friends. I have always been attracted to traditional textiles and because I live close to Decorah, I have been able to take advantage of the classes and exhibits available at Vesterheim. I am especially interested in stranded and twined knitting, rutevev, rya Telemarksteppe and double-weave.

Currently I have been working to combine double-weave and rya. Several years ago, I became intrigued by a coverlet pictured in *The Woven Coverlets of Norway* by Katherine Larson that combines nonreversible double-weave and rya. I had previously taken a class at Vesterheim from Betty Johannesen on rya weaving, and I went on to weave several rya blankets using eight-harness drafts. I had also woven many double-weave pieces, both reversible and nonreversible. The combination of the two techniques was especially interesting because it is possible to hide the rya knots between the two layers of double-weave, thereby creating a textile with a pick-up design on one surface and pile on the other. Using Rauma Spealsaugarn, I combined the two techniques, and learned to tie the rya knots upside down on the lower surface while I wove the pick-up pattern on the upper surface. The resulting textile was quite sturdy and warm with two distinctively different surfaces.

I would appreciate a dialogue with other weavers who are familiar with the two techniques to further explore a combination of double-weave and rya. Email me at [demula01@luther.edu](mailto:demula01@luther.edu)

Laura will teach a class combining rya and doubleweave at Vesterheim July 10-14, 2010.



Double-weave pickup combined with rya. Rauma prydevgarn. 38x56." Photo by Charlie Langton.



Double-weave pickup combined with rya. Rauma prydevgarn. 27x42." Photo by Charlie Langton.

# VISITING THE VESTERHEIM COLLECTION

BY JAN MOSTROM (GOLD MEDAL WINNER)

I have enjoyed visiting the Vesterheim textile collection to research their wonderful treasures. This will be the first in a series of articles that looks at Vesterheim's ryas and the weave structures of these ryas.

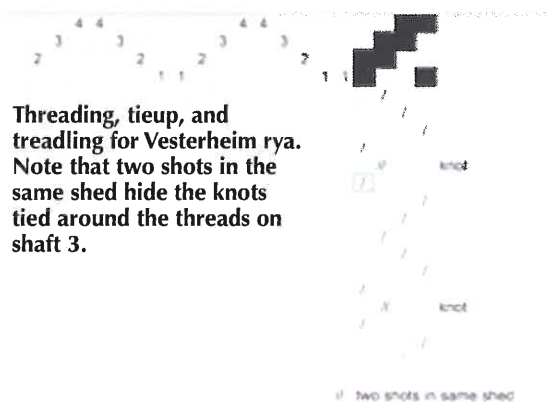


Vesterheim rya #1979.083.001 donated by Marion and Lila Nelson.

The warp sett is 22 epi and the weft is about 16 ppi.



Detail of Vesterheim rya.



When recreating this structure, I used Rauma Åklægarn for the warp and weft as well as the knots. The knots were tied on a shed that raises shafts 2 and 3. The knots are tied around the threads on shaft 3 and the ends come up between them. They

are hidden by the weft shot which is thrown twice in the same shed. I used a floating

selvage to make this easier. The double shots create a bit of a ridge in the weaving but hide the knots well.

I think this is the way the original was woven.



This rya's backing is a point twill variation in dark green, red, gold, and natural white warp stripes. The knots are in whites with borders of 5 red and gold knots. When the rya is hemmed, the warp which is knotted creates a border on those two sides of the rya blanket and helps the white knots in color. All of the weft was woven in dark green.

I used this backing for a rya wallhanging. It was inspired by the protective symbols painted in white on the dark walls of a medieval house in the Hardanger Museum. I made my knots in blacks and dark grays and browns and in white and off white shades. I liked the green, red, white and gold of the Vesterheim rya so much that I retained those colors in my backing. The brighter warp knots give a nice contrast to the neutrals of the other knots the colored threads need to match the right spot in the draft.



The backing of the Protection rya, in the manner of the Vesterheim rya.



Jan Mostrom, Protection rya, 19"x56."

## MY TRIP TO NORWAY AND WHAT I LEARNED ABOUT CULTURAL SKILLS

BY KAREN AAKRE

I left Minneapolis on the 18<sup>th</sup> of June with the Vesterheim textile tour. (More details about the trip can be found in *The Norwegian Textile Letter* August 2011 and November 2011.)

After a couple of days in Iceland, we flew to Bergen and spent six days there. Among many unique sights, the log houses with the grass roofs at an outdoor farm museum were particularly interesting. I learned that birch bark under the dirt kept it from seeping through.

I snapped many loom and spinning wheel pictures. This was a trip of a life time. We stayed in Skei and Fagernes, and eventually made it to the Oslo airport where I separated from the group to proceed on to **RAULAND AKADEMIET**, where I would study *skinnfeller* from the 30<sup>th</sup> of June to July 8<sup>th</sup> when I would fly home.

I had spent a year and a half tracking down Britt Solheim to take this class and was so excited to have it happen.

The class was taught in Norsk, and it was hard for me to keep up. Every morning I joined in singing Norwegian folk songs and we had class 9-5 most days and worked till ten at night most nights.

I started with a small skin for a chair cushion and then started to tackle a three skin *skinnfeller* which took me a couple of days. I would pull the needle through with a pliers, and stuck my fingers many times. The blood on the skin was said to bless the hide.



Karen Aakre's Skinnfeller.

I used Gottland sheep for this one, and then I made one of spelsau which took two hides and I also made mittens, booties, two scarves, a head warmer, wrist warmers, and a pillow top. I left Minnesota with one suitcase and returned with three. I bought 14 birch blocks from Britt to make more here and I am weaving a Sami rock loom piece and will sew this in the Norwegian technique to skins I have at home. I had a hard time getting back to Oslo as I missed the bus in the morning of the 8<sup>th</sup> and a kind lady drove me to the nearest station. Then if the flight hadn't been delayed two hours, I might still be in Norway. Wow what a time! The hardanger, the rosmaling, the weaving, the carving I saw were so beautiful. I took 2000 digital pictures and 14 rolls of film and will cherish the trip for the rest of my days.

**Karen lives on a farm outside of Underwood, Minnesota. She invites school groups to visit the immigrant cabins on her property..**

## SOME PIECES FROM THE RYA STUDY GROUP

### EXHIBITION AT VESTERHEIM



Judy Ness, rya pillow.

Contemporary *ryer* (plural of rya) still employ the pile structure of the ancient *ryer* but may use more elaborate design elements. Early *ryer* were discovered in Norwegian ship burials, evidence of the great respect and value of these magnificent textiles. *Ryer* are passed down over the years as prized family heirlooms and continue to enrich Scandinavian life, honoring a rich past in handicraft. Today, *ryer* have taken their place in the world of contemporary textile art.



Marion Marzolf, *Fire in the Night*, rya.



Betty Johannesen, rya with runes.



Gayle Bingham, pillow with Icelandic style knots.

Sharon Marquardt, "Veske," rya handbag.



Corwyn Knutson, rya.

More pieces from this exhibition will appear in future issues of the *Norwegian Textile Letter*.



Barbara Overby, *Ice Fishing*, rya.

# VISITING THE VESTERHEIM COLLECTION

BY JAN MOSTROM (GOLD MEDAL WINNER)

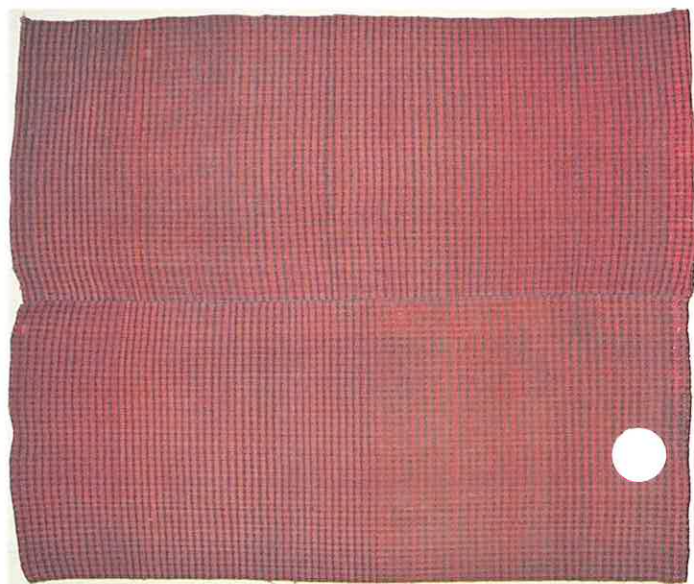


Pile side of rya coverlet 69x60 from Western Norway. Vesterheim (1990.013.001)

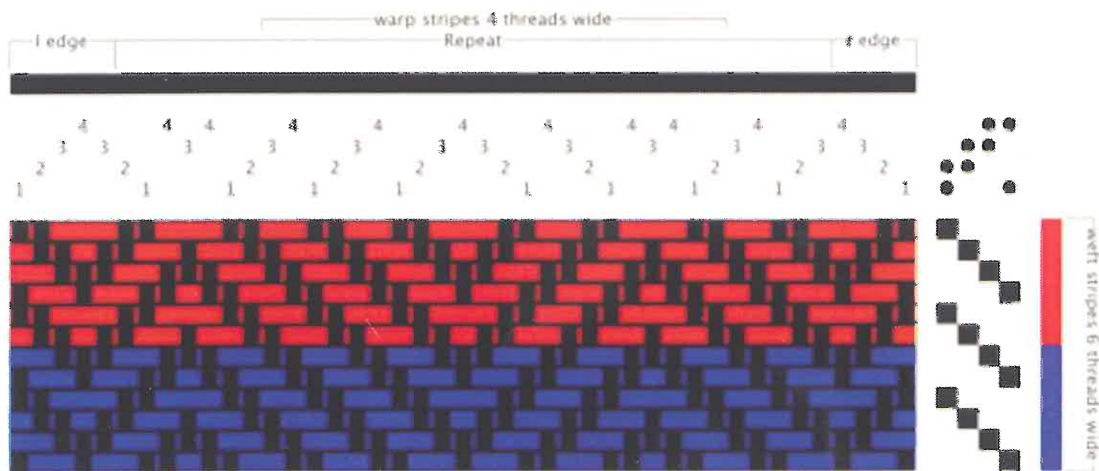
We are looking at a rya coverlet from the Vesterheim collection. The backing is an irregular twill houndstooth pattern in indigo blue and an orange red that looks like it could be dyed with madder. Both warp and weft are the same 2 ply yarns. The sett is an even weave set at 12 epi. The knots are in green, gold, blue, and red arranged in 4" blocks of one color. The color arrangement of the blocks is somewhat random, but each row of blocks has all colors. The knots varied somewhat in their location from row to row. The warp stripes are 4 threads wide and the weft stripes are 6 threads wide. The coverlet was hemmed by rolling the

cut edge of the coverlet under and sewing it down.

I used Rauma Alkea yarn to weave a sample of this structure and it worked well set at 12 epi. I placed the knots around the lifted threads on treadle 2 when shafts 2 and 3 were lifted. That left three threads down between the threads the knots were tied around. This space allowed complete coverage of the knots on the non-pile side of the coverlet so that side looks like a twill blanket.



Non-pile side of rya coverlet.



# 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 selvage.

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

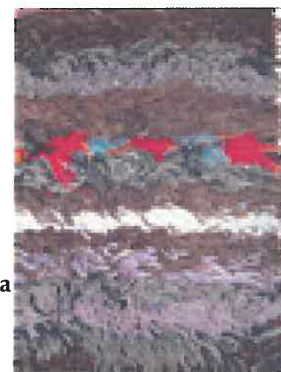
added.

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.