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THE CONTEMPORARY RYA RUG IN AMERICA

by Marion T. Marzolf

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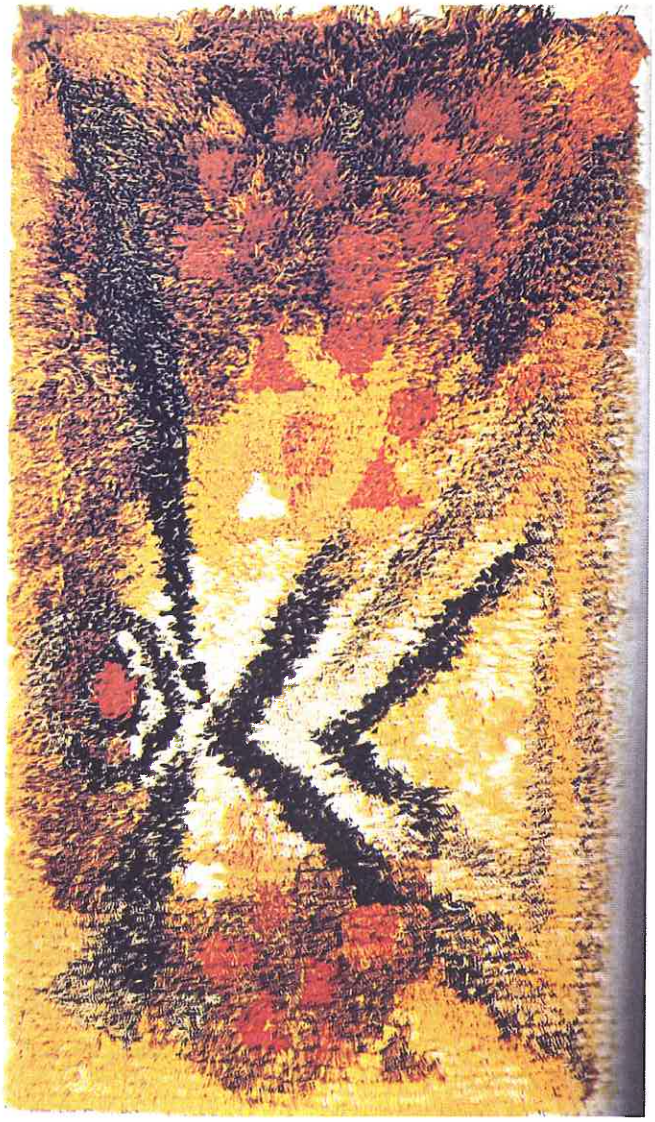
In the 1950s and 1960s rya rugs with their deep, luxurious pile, geometric and abstract designs made a big impression on the American market. Postwar American families were together again, furnishing contemporary homes and apartments that needed the warmth of colorful and modern furnishings. The arts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



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

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 20th 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 20th 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.

The magazine publicity enabled her to sell her handwoven rugs at the Bertha Shaefer Gallery, noted in New York City for modern art and contemporary art textiles for interior decoration, and at Georg Jensen Inc. on Fifth Avenue. She received so many commissions that she formed her own rya weaving studio in Blekinge, southern Sweden. Her weavers knew the rya technique and she used Swedish wool yarns from Wahlsteds in Dala Floda, Dalecarlia, Sweden. In January 1958 her handwoven ryas were featured at Georg Jensen and published in color in a March 1958, *House and Garden* cover story on contemporary living. These wool pile rugs were 6 x 8 feet and sold for $720.There were 800 knots per square foot, spaced at 5 to 6 per inch, with three to six threads per knot.

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.

The Finland Connection

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.

In postwar America, students in art schools were designing rya and flossa rugs and submitting them to exhibitions. "Young Americans 1958" included rya rugs, and a vibrantly colored rya by Richard (or Ruben) Eshkanian, a Cranbrook graduate and later art teacher, won honorable mention. As Gerhardt Knodel, who became head of textiles at Cranbrook in 1972 pointed out, 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.

During the 1970s the craft magazines included only a few articles on rya rugs, including a 1972 cover story about Robert Kidd, a graduate and teacher at Cranbrook, who established his studio in the Detroit area and wove many rya and flossa commissions for executives furnishing their new contemporary homes. Several of his students experimented with the technique, including breaking out of the rug rectangle and creating environments.

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.

During the 1960s and 1970s the weaving magazines carried frequent ads for rya rug yarn and rug kits. Pre-woven backing, design charts, and yarns were available from companies in Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Finland. The Friends of Finnish Handicraft in Helsinki sold kits for their famous designer rugs, or for a price would make them to order, which they still do today.

"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 9th 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 21st 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

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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**

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

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

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