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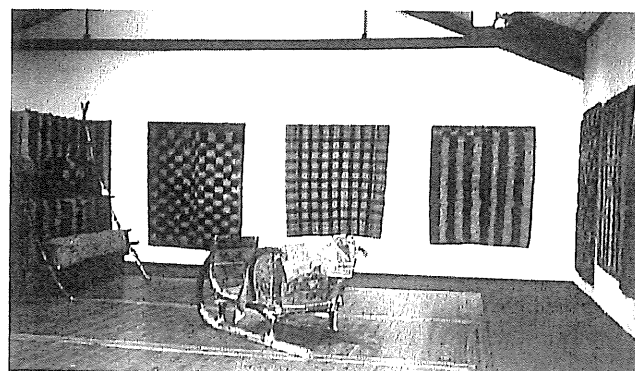
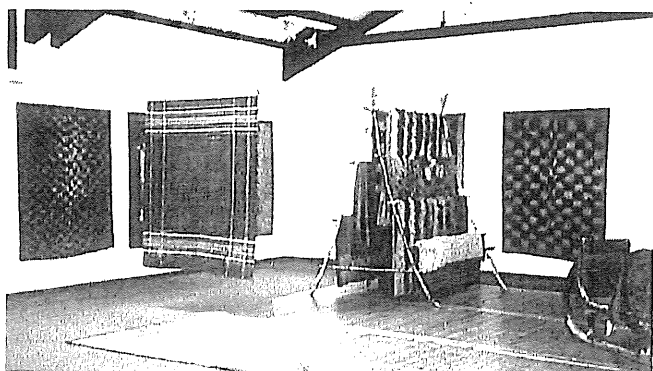
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Voss Ryer – Traditional Bedcover and Contemporary Art

by Marta Kløve Juuhl

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

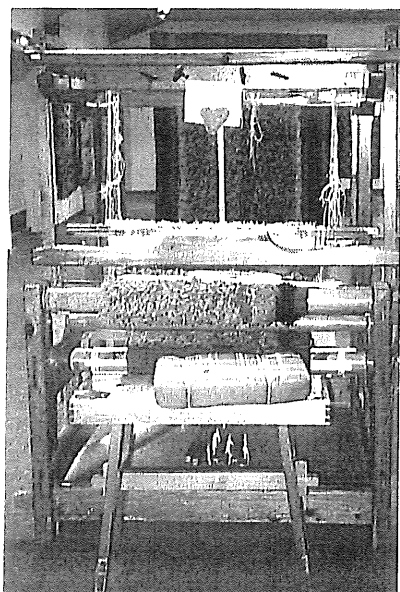
Three years ago, Voss Folkemuseum had a great exhibition on *ryer* (pile coverlets) a traditional textile in Voss for the last 200 or 300 years. Voss is situated in western Norway, not along the coast though; it's inland. Through the local newspaper the museum asked the inhabitants to borrow *ryer* (I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



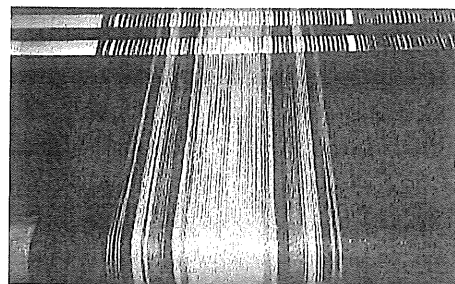
Voss Folkmuseum exhibit 2002

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.

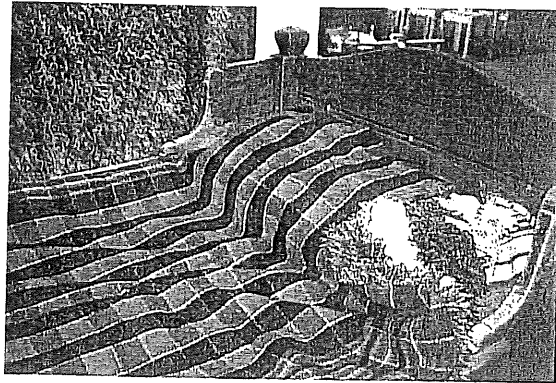
It was found to be more beneficial to shear the sheep in spring and autumn than to slaughter them. The ryer were much more pleasant to use, and they were easier to keep clean than the sheepskins. A rye can stand a good washing.

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

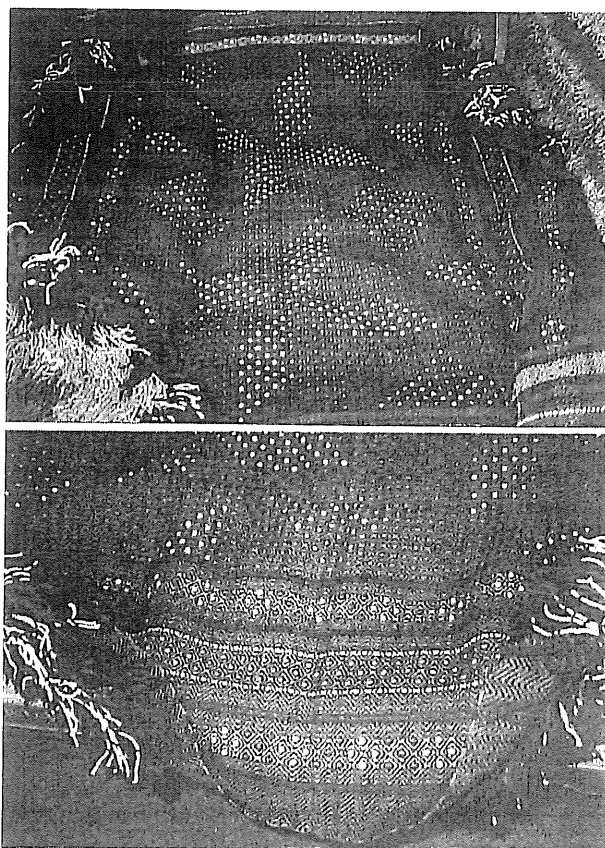
Voss ryer consist of a loom-woven blanket and a nap, or pile, rug. I will use the word nap to describe the loose yarns hanging down; they are 5 – 8 cm long. Two different weaving techniques are combined to make into one rye. While the blanket (you may also call it the bottom) is woven, the nap is knotted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

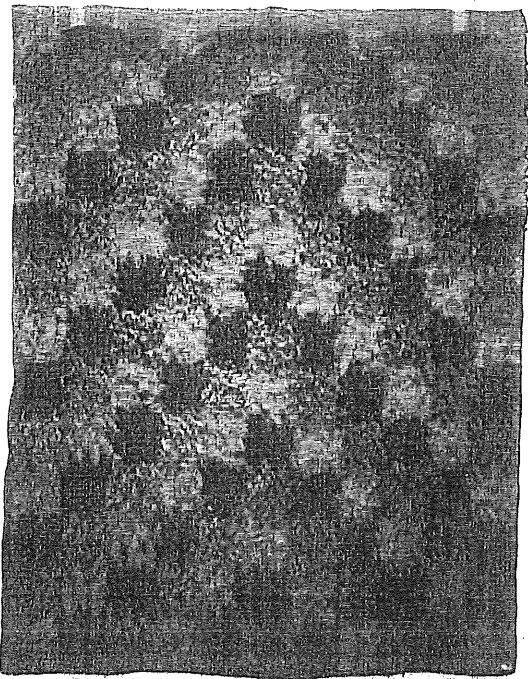
unfortunately I never met her. When I started investigating ryer, both my grandmothers and my mother were dead too, so I had nobody in the family to ask.

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 *båtryer* (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