



# WHAT IS NORWEGIAN WEAVING?



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Norway's textile heritage has deep roots in the work of women in the country's rural valleys and coasts. In centuries past, weaving was a necessary skill, and there was a loom in almost every farm home. Many of the techniques and patterns used for coverlets and linens were similar to those in other countries, particularly other Scandinavian countries, but regional variants in pattern and technique developed in the often isolated areas of Norway. Preferences for design and techniques became part of local culture as they were passed down through generations of skilled weavers.

Modern viewers of old textiles might be struck by beautiful colors or the complexity of a pattern, without understanding the full set of skills required of the weaver. After raising the sheep, she would clip and sort the fleece. The wool would be washed, carded, and spun into yarn of varying thicknesses, depending on the purpose. The outer, longer guard hair would be reserved for strong, lustrous yarn used in coverlets. The shorter fibers would be spun for clothing. Yarn was often dyed, requiring knowledge of cultivated and wild plants for long-lasting dyes. The weaver would wind yards of warp yarn onto the loom, in preparation for adding the colorful weft yarn. All this before even starting the time-consuming and challenging task of weaving!

Looms of the type commonly used in Norway, and occasionally brought by immigrants to the United States. Vesterheim 1979.021.001—Gift of St. Olaf College.





Photograph by Herbjørn Gausta, taken in Tinn, Telemark, Norway, in the mid-1890s. Vesterheim Archive—Gausta Collection.

## Exploring Coverlets and Customs

If you look on the corner bed in a historical Norwegian home, you will see an important part of the country's cultural heritage—the coverlet, or *åkle*. Communities in a cold, northern country could not have existed without the resourcefulness and skill of women in creating all the textiles their families needed, but the weavers' creativity also brought color and pattern to homes. Textiles were often listed in estate records, indicating the high value placed upon them within families.

The *åkle* on a bed clearly displayed the skill of its weaver and the status of its owner. Coverlets were also used in cradles, in sleighs, and occasionally on walls during holidays. They were important at times of life changes, covering a baby at christening, adorning a bridal bed, or covering a casket at life's end. A fine coverlet might adorn a horse during a special procession, or a worn coverlet might become an everyday horse blanket.

Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum has a deep collection of more than 150 historical coverlets. Many were brought to the United States by emigrants from Norway. Some may have been warm coverings for the voyage, and others brought as valued family heirlooms.

## Billedvev, or Pictorial Tapestry

*Billedvev*, the Norwegian word for tapestry, translates perfectly: picture weaving. Tapestry spread north to Scandinavia with itinerant weavers from Europe and flourished in Norway during the 1600s and 1700s. Most tapestries were used as bed coverlets, though sometimes they were displayed on walls. The images were generally religious themes with instructive moral lessons.

Norway never developed a professional guild system of trained tapestry weavers. Instead, Norwegian women of means learned the craft, and they wove in relative isolation. As patterns were shared, copied, and revised, the figures became flat and without perspective, and empty spaces were filled with pattern. But the Norwegian *billedvev* designs held a charming freshness that was lacking in many Continental tapestries that were slavish copies of paintings.

Norwegian *billedvev* technique veered from Continental tapestry technique in important ways. Norwegian weavers wove in all of the loose ends on the back of the *billedvev*, so they were reversible. They also used decorative joins and dovetailing when colors met along a straight line. Eliminating slits resulted in a more durable coverlet. Medieval coverlets were woven using weft of the strong and lustrous wool of Norwegian *spalsau* sheep, and warp of linen.



*The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins* was a popular motif and held a clear message to viewers to be watchful and prepared for the second coming of Christ. Vesterheim 1987.143.001—Gift of Dorothy Burr Thompson.



Detail of *Rutevev* coverlet woven in western Norway in the mid-nineteenth century. Vesterheim 1980.080.002—Gift of Clara Asbjornson.

## *Rutevev*, or Geometric Tapestry

Geometric or square-weave coverlets, with patterns of crosses, diamonds, and flowers, carried high status. The technique is a variant of tapestry and is time-consuming to weave. The patterns are woven line-by-line with individual bundles of yarn for each color change along the width of the coverlet.

*Rutevev* coverlets often had a large central area with one large motif or multiples of the same motif. Patterned borders at the top and bottom might match or feature different motifs.

These square-weave coverlets were most common along the west coast, particularly in Hordaland and Sogn og Fjordane Counties, and in southern Norway in Setesdal and Hallingdal.

Norwegian weavers used fibers from the native *spælsau* sheep. The long guard hairs of this sturdy sheep has a lustrous finish and takes dye well.

Photo by Thomas Muus, Berlin, Germany 2006, Wikimedia Commons.



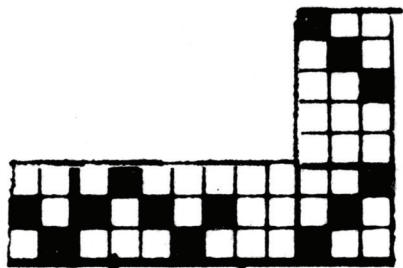
Detail of *Krokbragd* coverlet brought in 1871 from Sunnhordland, Norway, to Chicago, Illinois. Vesterheim LC1565—Donor unknown, Luther College Collection.



## *Krokbragd*, or Boundweave

*Krokbragd* (literally “crooked pattern”) coverlets were very common in Norway. These are particularly dense and warm coverlets. In some areas of Gudbrandsdal they were called “*tykk-åkle*,” or thick coverlets. Sometimes *krokbragd* coverlets reflect the creativity of an individual weaver; others were woven in patterns handed down through generations in a particular area.

In a weaving “draft,” the horizontal grid shows how to thread the warp on the loom. The vertical line indicates which treadles to push to create the pattern while weaving.



## Rya, or Pile Weave

Pile-weave coverlets have decorative and utilitarian roots in Norway. When used on a bed, the pile side faced down, to trap body heat in cold and drafty homes.

*Rya* coverlets were woven throughout Norway, but were most important along the seacoasts. In open fishing boats in the cold North Sea, *båtrye* coverlets were essential, both to lie on and to use as covers. Unlike a sheepskin, which would become stiff and unusable in salt water, a rye woven of yarn remained flexible and warm. They were valuable—a single *båtrye* might use all the wool produced on a farm in one season, and could weigh more than twenty pounds.

In some *rya* coverlets, resource-conscious weavers used small strips of rags and yarn of varying qualities and thickness for the knots. Sometimes initials or dates were woven into the pile side. The smooth side was most often woven in a pattern of twill stripes or squares. In most *ryas*, the backs of the knots lie hidden in the ground weave.



This *rya* was woven around 1890 by Nikoline Indreberg of Skodje, Sunnmøre, for her husband, who traveled by boat for his carpentry work. After he died, the family had to move and the *rya* was one of the few belongings they took with them.

Vesterheim 2010.008.001—Gift of Else Bigton, in memory of Else Indreberg Spjelkavik.



Laura Demuth, a weaver and weaving instructor from Decorah, Iowa, is one of many American weavers interested in preserving Norwegian weaving techniques. She wove a doubleweave coverlet with an extra twist of complexity—she added the pile of *rya* to the back. Collection of the weaver.

## *Dobbeltvev*, or Doubleweave

Elaborate symbol-filled patterns and challenging technique blended to make doubleweave coverlets prized family possessions. In doubleweave, two layers of cloth are woven at the same time. The patterns emerge at the points where one layer comes to the top, and the other to the bottom.

Doubleweave coverlets were mostly woven in the eastern part of Norway, along the Swedish border. Because of their complexity, they were often woven by local weavers specializing in the technique. The patterns were filled with symbols, such as hearts for love, branches for life and death, pelicans for Christian charity, and of course, the eight-petal flower found in so many Scandinavian textiles, for good luck.



## Overshot Techniques

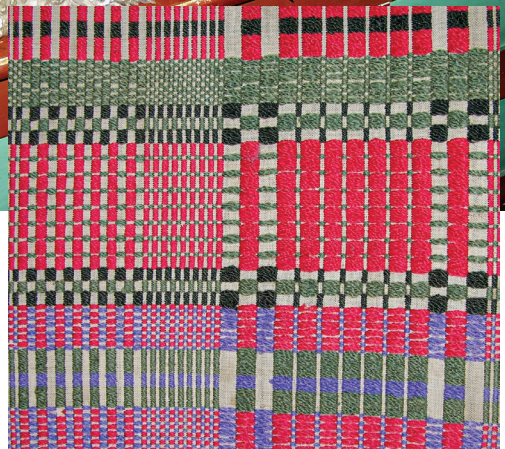
In overshot, a technique known in many countries, supplemental threads in colorful geometric patterns are woven on a plain base of linen or cotton. The most popular overshot coverlets in Norway were *tavlebragd* (known in English as monk's belt) and *skillbragd* (sometimes referred to in English by its Swedish name, *opphämpa*).

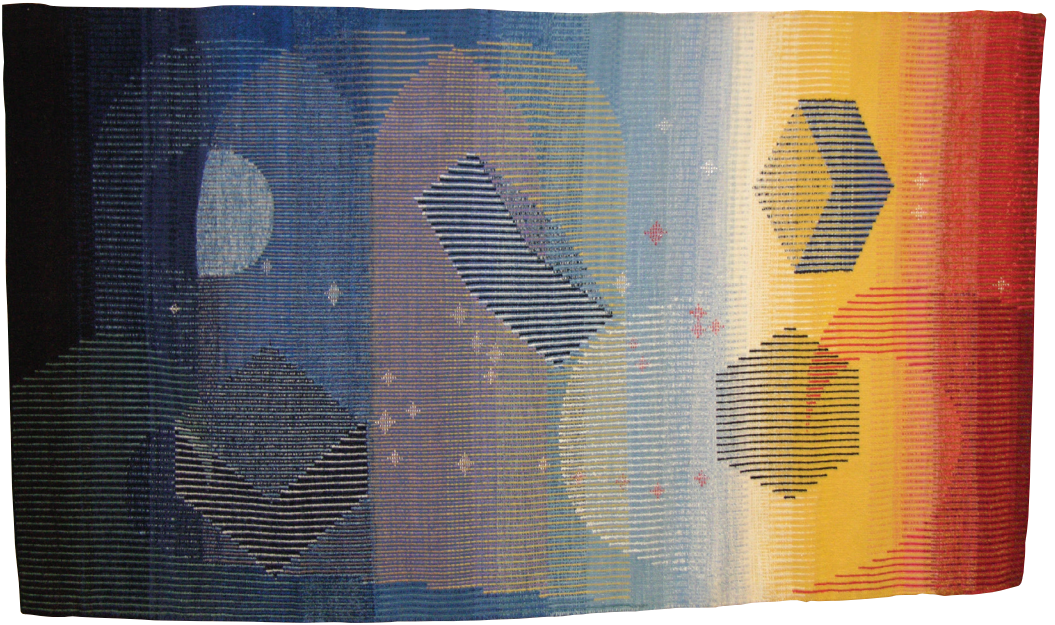
*Skillbragd* coverlets were often used in connection with important life events. Throughout Norway, they were used to wrap babies at christenings. A popular *skillbragd* pattern in Valdres is called *kristenteppe*, literally, christening blanket. Coverlets used over the coffin during a funeral often included a central square or rectangle woven in a different color, where a candle or Bible might be placed.



Colorful overshot coverlets were often sewn to the reverse of a sheepskin. The warm fleece was placed toward the sleeper to capture body heat on frigid northern nights. The pattern side faced up, adding color and pattern to the room.

Vesterheim 1994.067.001—Gift of Ruth Fretheim.





For *Resolution*, Judy Ness of Eugene, Oregon, combined two Norwegian weaving techniques. She started with boundweave, which historically featured small-scale geometric patterns and simple shading. By stretching the motifs and enhancing the shading, she brought the textile into the present, then took it further by changing colors in the manner of tapestry. She says about the piece, "The boxes reflect both thesis and antithesis. They are the same element from different perspectives. Their movement through the plane, from one reality to another, is an infinite cycle of resolution and transformation."

Vesterheim 2005.028.00—Gift of Judy Ann Ness.

## Moving the Tradition Forward

Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum provides important resources to maintain the vitality of Norwegian weaving traditions. In the annual *National Norwegian-American Folk Art Exhibition*, each entry is a pursuit by weavers to honor Norwegian textile traditions. Some weave faithful interpretations of historical pieces, while others use the techniques in novel, contemporary interpretations. Through public display of these works, the tradition lives on.

Weaving and other fiber arts classes, taught by visiting Norwegian instructors or master American teachers, combine instruction and cultural history, and attract students from across the country. Museum artifacts are important learning tools, for examination and inspiration. Through mastery of technique, the tradition lives on.

## Vesterheim's Folk Art School

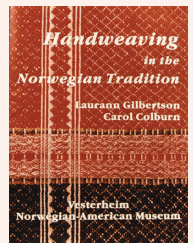
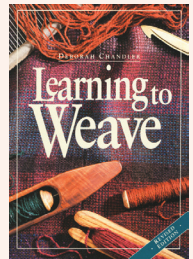
If you want to give weaving a try, Vesterheim offers many classes each year! The classes vary in the techniques offered, and in experience levels from beginner to advanced. They are taught by nationally-known instructors from the United States and Norway. Students have the opportunity to connect with a community of artists and study historical and modern pieces from the museum's amazing collection. For more information, check [vesterheim.org](http://vesterheim.org) or contact the Vesterheim Folk Art School at 563-382-9681.

## Museum Store

You can find books and some small tools for weaving and needlework in Vesterheim's Museum Store, located in the Westby-Torgerson Education Center, the building where you'll also find the Folk Art School's comfortable studio-style classrooms. Many books are also available in the museum's online store at [vesterheim.org](http://vesterheim.org).

## Connect with Others

The *Norwegian Textile Letter* (NTL) is a quarterly digital publication for fans of Norwegian textiles. There are articles about historical and contemporary weaving and other textile techniques in Scandinavian countries, and highlights of related activities in the United States. Vesterheim's collection is regularly featured. Visit [norwegiantextileletter.com](http://norwegiantextileletter.com).





## About the Author

Robbie LaFleur, from Minneapolis, Minnesota, has been following a thread of Scandinavian textiles since she studied weaving at Valdres Husflidsskole in Fagernes, Norway, in 1977. She continued her study with Scandinavian instructors at workshops in Norway and the U.S. She achieved a Gold Medal in Weaving from Vesterheim in 2006. She coordinates the Weavers Guild of Minnesota Scandinavian Weavers Study Group and is editor of the *Norwegian Textile Letter*. In 2019 she was awarded an American Scandinavian Foundation fellowship and traveled to Norway to study the transparent tapestry technique of famed weaver Frida Hansen. Visit [robbielafleur.com](http://robbielafleur.com).



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