

**Braided Rugs:
A Surprising Forum for Progressive Reform**

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When visitors enter a historic home, very little attention is paid to rugs and carpeting which soften the footfalls on the hard and softwood floors. There is a varied history to those pieces, which goes beyond its maker and its mere function to incorporate social attitudes and changes. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, carpets and other floor coverings were scarce, and most of home decor would be considered meager by current standards. In the years of English colonization the colonies produced raw materials for England, rarely finished products. Only the wealthy colonists could afford luxury items like carpeting, imported from England even after the American Revolution. Generally, colonists who could not purchase carpeting created or purchased rugs. The process of creating rugs through weaving or braiding incorporates a surrounding culture that has endured for centuries. Yet, simply reading about the history of textile production cannot fully create an appreciation for the subject. To intensify the research process the author created a rug herself to understand the historic context more completely.

After the Colonial Era the process of making rugs or other handicraft continued to be a tradition passed from one generation to the next. Also important to the traditions surrounding handicrafts was the educational and moral values associated with engaging in these kinds of home industries. Lucy Larcom wrote in 1899 of her childhood experiences in the early 1800s. She described her aunt sitting at her wheel in the kitchen spinning flax. It was in this setting that Lucy “learned [her] letters in a few days, standing at Aunt Hannah’s knee while she pointed them out in the spelling book with a pin, skipping over the ‘a b abs’ into words of one and two syllables, thence

taking a flying leap into the New Testament.”¹ These recollections of home life would be a motivating force behind many social reforms beginning in the mid-nineteenth century.

Industrial processes made carpeting affordable by the mid-1800s and it eventually became an essential element in home decor. Helen Von Rosenstiel and Gail Caskey Winkler, in their book *Floor Coverings for Historic Buildings*, term this period “The Carpet Revolution.” A shift from a local commercially based economy to an industrial-centered society created an increase in the middle-class population. This in turn changed consumption and enlarged production patterns creating a demand for a wider range of goods including new interior decoration like wallpaper, light fixtures, artwork, furniture, and even floor coverings of all types. The biggest boom in carpet production occurred when steam-powered looms entered the manufacture scene. By 1841 these types of powered looms were producing twenty-five yards a day, four times the amount made on handlooms. The amount being fabricated coupled with a decrease in cost made it possible for the middle-class to include carpeting of some type in their homes.²

This mechanization caused many individuals to call for a reclaiming of “traditional” handicraft as a form of protest. They felt that industrialization created a society with escalating impersonality and moral degradation. They viewed home crafts, such as weaving and rug making, as a protest against an ever-increasing homogenous society. Many individuals joined the Arts and Crafts movement as an outlet to express the individuality they were “losing.” In 1902, Oscar Triggs wrote that, “the Arts and Crafts movement is the industrial phase of the modern evolution of individuality.”³ Women in the Arts and

¹ Maria Bank, *Anonymous was a Woman: A Celebration in Words and Images of Traditional American Art—and the Women who Made It* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1995), 16.

² Helen Von Rosenstiel and Gail Caskey Winkler, *Floor Coverings for Historic Homes* (Washington: The Preservation Press, 1988), 41-50, 73-81, 117, 120-22. A detailed description of the floors and their coverings prior to the advent of industrialization can be found in this book.

³ Oscar Lovell Triggs, *Chapters in the History of the Arts and Crafts Movement* (Chicago: The Bohemia Guild of the Industrial Art League, 1902), 162.

Crafts movement reinforced Victorian ideals about women's culture. Idealists intended that knowledge should be transmitted from one generation of morally upright women to the next and weaving proved an excellent model for the reform-minded craft revivalists. Like Lucy Larcom learning the alphabet at the knee of her aunt, weaving provided an oral tradition, which created a basis for a morally upright lifestyle. Weaving, therefore, became a metaphor for the strength of the moral fiber and a symbol of the unification of art and labor, the essence behind the Arts and Crafts movement.⁴

The individuals and organizations that participated in the crafts revival translated their ideas to meet the objectives of Progressive-era reforms. For example, in 1906, Pauline Carrington Bouve suggested that the revival of the weaving industry would save the mind, spirit, and heart of America from the evils of industrialization. She wrote:

There is much that is beautiful in our country. Who knows but that some day in the future an American weaver might stand before an American inventor and say as he points to the fabric on his loom: "O Inventor of great machines, I passed through the forest and saw the sunshine through the tender green leaves and heard the songs of birds, and I put them into my carpet with love and thankfulness in my heart for them. And therefore is my, O maker of machines, greater than thine because that I deprive not my fellow man of the right to work out from his soul the thought that is in him!"⁵

Bouve believed that weaving flourished not in a commercial center but in an agricultural climate—country life was the ideal. Bouve also proposed that weaving programs be instituted as an aspect of jail reform. Establishing weaving shops in jails would not only provide the government with a profit but also provide

⁴ Eileen Boris, *Art and Labor: Ruskin, Morris, and the Craftsman Ideal in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 122-23.

⁵ Pauline Carrington Bouve, "The Story of the Rug," *New England Magazine* (March 1906): 78.

the prisoner with “inward harmony” or “new freshness . . . to his heart and soul.” Not to mention that the “somber tone of prison life and prison work [would be] touched with color.”⁶

Another reformer wanted to use rug making as a way to ease the lives of farmwomen. Handicraft, according to the reformer, would push back the tide of stress caused by the rapid changes occurring in America caused by industrialization and urbanization. This strain especially manifested itself in women, chiefly farmwomen. “Insanity among farms’ wives, shows clearly the effect of mental and nervous energy left to turn back and ferment in a life of monotonous household care and the sordid trials of incident upon the possession of only insufficient means.”⁷ Weaving was a solution to this problem. It would allow women to create income without leaving the confines of the home and expand the minds and imagination of women.⁸

As we move closer to the present, the 1930s to 1990s, the literature begins to speak specifically about braided rugs and other rag rugs as part of home decoration. Designers advised placing these types of rugs in bedrooms and children’s room, bathrooms, kitchens, or other hot rooms.⁹ Designers and writers alike emphasized thrift, recycling of materials, beauty, practicality, and durability of the braided rug. They also expressed romantic sentiments in their promotion of rug making. Marguerite Ickis believed that homey comforts helped intellectuals like Benjamin Franklin retain a degree of practicality. In her book, *Braided Rugs for Fun and Profit*, she wrote that, “while their heads may be in the clouds, evidently philosophers know upon what their feet rested.”¹⁰ Connecting an American legend like Benjamin Franklin with an everyday object like rugs, helped perpetuate American myths. Romanticism of these myths garnered attention for these types of rugs; by having this form of rug, a commoner could relate to an

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ “Distinctive American Rugs: Designed and Woven in the Homes of Country Women,” *Craftsman* (June 1906): 366.

⁸ Ibid, 336, 371, 372.

⁹ Von Rosenstiel, 211.

¹⁰ Marguerite Ickis, *Braided Rugs for Fun and Profit* (New York: Homecrafts, 1951), 3.

American legend. The associations of a traditional handicraft—the braided rug—with images sustaining and nurturing an ideal took on greater meaning during the Cold War. Fern Carter, also writing in the 1950s, gives us another example of this romanticism:

As I see it, the braided rug was long ago promoted from the back porch to the parlor. By tradition alone it is entitled to a foremost place in American home. It is our first and only native floor covering and with it pioneer women succeeded in transforming crude shelters from the elements into comfortable homes.¹¹

This is some of the information available to interpreters to implement into the educational goals of their sites. Interpreters in history museums can present three broad themes as they create their rugs. First, rugs were produced out of necessity. Second, rugs were used as a springboard for desired social reform. Finally, rugs were made based upon nostalgic beliefs about the countryside or specific time period such as the Colonial Era. The method chosen for interpretation depends on the time period, region, and economic status being interpreted.

Discovering the process used to create braided rugs that reflect the techniques used in 1830 or 1930 involves a survey of contemporary publications and period literature. Both offer information on the process as well as suggestions on collecting rags, dyeing, color, and design. Information can also be found in “help” books for women. For example, Mrs. Lydia Maria Francis Child’s book, *The American Housewife* (1832), gave this advice to her readers: “After old coats, pantaloons, &c. have been cut up for boys, and are no longer capable of being converted into garments, cut them into strips, and employ the leisure moments of children, or domestics, in sewing and braiding them for door-mats.”¹² In contrast to Mrs. Child’s advice, Fern Carter suggested that her contemporaries use

¹¹ Fern Carter, *Fern Carter’s Braided Rug Book* (Portland: Fern Carter, 1953), 9.

¹² Lydia Maria Francis Child, *The American Frugal Housewife* (Boston: Carter, Hendee, and Co., 1832), 13.

primarily new woolens to complete their rugs, but used rags were acceptable:

Any craftsman will agree that it is sheer waste to spend good time working with inferior materials. For this reason I use and suggest the use of woolens . . . You may use old woolens, or new, but don't use both old and new in the same rug. The reason for this is obvious, since the used wool will wear out much sooner than the new fabric.¹³

The information presented here represents only half of an experience historic sites can provide; Testing the knowledge and creative abilities of visitors by providing hands-on experimentation and visual stimulation is the other. It is not simply enough to read or hear about rug making and its impact on society because that is living vicariously through another's work, but actual creation of an object can bring new light to a historical encounter. Personal experience opens a new understanding of the labor costs, materials, and aesthetic qualities involved in weaving or braiding no matter what period a site is interpreting. For the author, the act of creating a braided rug augmented the research in ways that simple description cannot attest to. A first hand look at braided rugs provided the author with a holistic view of the past through—reading, communicating, and creating—something a historic site can implement into their educational programming.

The goal of interpreting this aspect of our material world is for the public to learn that rugs are more than just floor coverings used to keep feet from touching cold floors or to collect dirt from shoes. In fact, rugs have been used and seen in a light beyond their utilitarian function for centuries. A piece of material culture that visitors may take for granted can become a tool to interpret the goals of reformers. Braided rugs seemed so simple and unpretentious, a braided rug turned out to be more significant than just a piece of furnishing.

¹³ Carter, 13.

