

Textile (Fiber) Art: Rug Hooking

Rug hooking has been popular in North America for over 200 years. It has progressed from being a purely practical skill to an art form. Rug hooking also has a social aspect. Since the materials are easily transportable, hookers often gather and converse while working on their rugs and attend camps where they hone their skills, learn new techniques and gather inspiration for new projects. And they enjoy the raised eyebrows when they tell a new acquaintance, “I am a hooker”.

The earliest hooked rugs were probably floor mats made in Yorkshire in the early part of the 19th century. Workers in the weaving mills were allowed to collect thrums, pieces of yarn that were about 9 inches long and of no use to the mill. Weavers took them home and pulled the thrums through a backing.

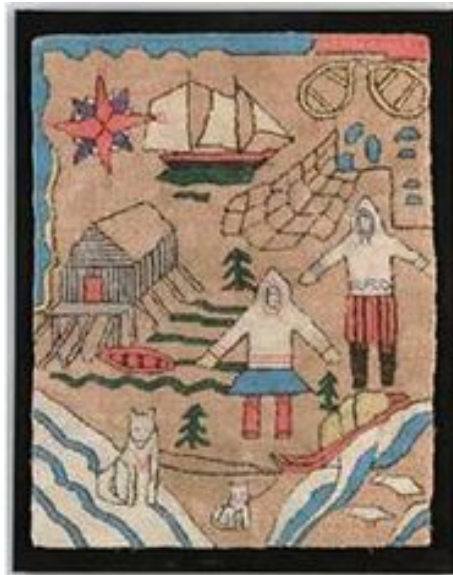
Rug hooking as we know it developed in North America along the Eastern Seaboard, from Newfoundland to the Maritimes provinces to New England. It was primarily a craft of poverty, where women used scraps of fabric to produce floor coverings. In the mid-19th century, burlap sacking, e.g., for imports of products like coffee and tea, became widely available. Low cost burlap sacking became the foundation for hooked rugs. Strips of wool could be easily pulled through burlap due to its wide weave structure. In combination with the accessibility to strips of fabric from old clothes or the textile mills that were cropping up, rug hooking was possible at virtually all economic levels. Initially, the patterns for hooked rugs were hand drawn. However in the latter half the 19th century, businesses cropped up that sold stamped patterns.

Among the first to sell stamped patterns was Edward Sands Frost of Biddeford Maine. Frost was a tin peddler who created zinc stencils to transfer a design for a rug onto a piece of burlap. Eventually he began his own rug pattern business and developed a method for printing patterns in colors. By the time ill health forced him to sell his business in 1876, he had approximately 180 different patterns for rugs, using over 750 zinc plates. This is a hooked rug from the Metropolitan Museum of Art believed to be a Frost design hooked around 1870.



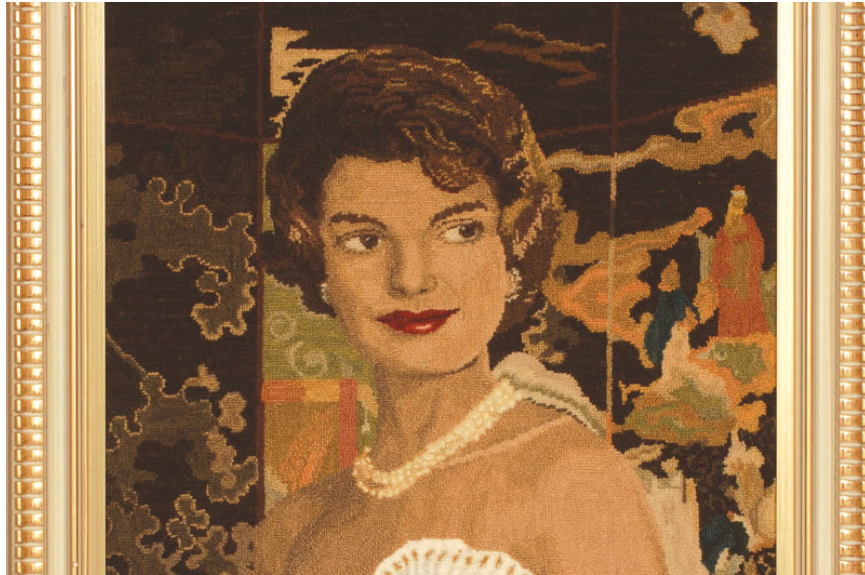
Cottage industries of hooked rugs emerged. Among two of the more famous are the Grenfell Mission in the town of St. Anthony, Newfoundland and Labrador and the town of Chéticamp in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia.

The Grenfell Mission was a philanthropic organization that provided medical and social services to people in rural communities of northern Newfoundland and Labrador. It was founded by Sir Wilfred Grenfell in 1892. The Grenfell Mission was famous for its hooked rugs which were sold to hospitals in the US and Great Britain. This cottage industry provided some much needed income in this remote area. This is a Grenfell hooked mat. The cottage industry went into decline with the advent of machine made carpets.

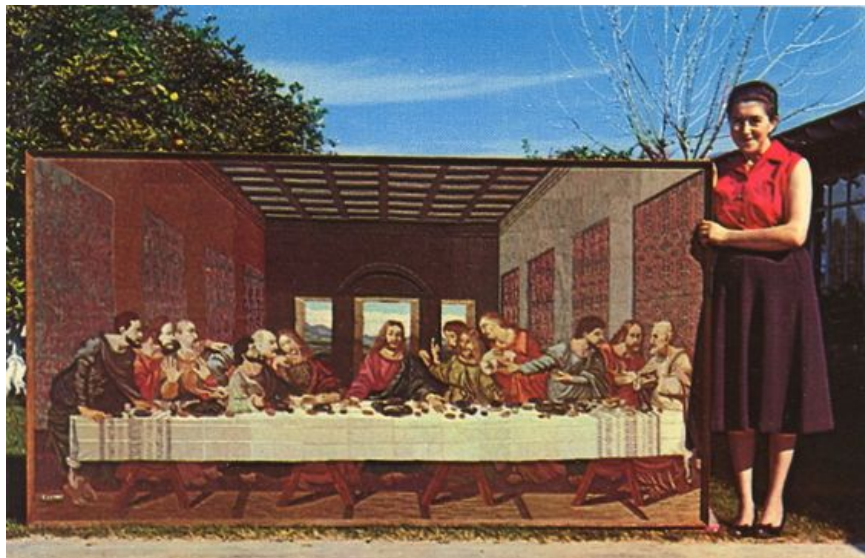


Chéticamp is a small Acadian fishing village in Cape Breton with a long tradition of rug hooking. In the 1920s, Lillian Burke, an American artist, came to Nova Scotia to teach the children of Alexander Graham Bell. She taught the women of Chéticamp how to dye wool and to use fine wool for rug hooking. She would design the rugs she wanted hooked and would market them in NYC. She paid little for the rugs, sold them at high profit, and rejected any that did not meet her exacting standards. It is said that she paid \$140 for one rug and sold it for \$4,000. Eventually, the women of Chéticamp started their own cooperative.

Today, Chéticamp is the home of Les Trois Pignons: the Museum of the Hooked Rug and Home Life. The museum features a Chéticamp rug hooker of note, Élizabeth LeFort (1914-2005). LeFort started by hooking stamped patterns, but eventually started designing her own. She is most well known for her portraits, including Dwight Eisenhower, Queen Elizabeth II, Jacqueline Kennedy and Prince Charles. This is LeFort's hooked rug of Jacqueline Kennedy.



LeFort has also hooked representations of paintings. She said that her favorite is of Da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. The hooked rug is 8 feet X four feet and incorporates 154 different shades of wool. The photo below is of LeFort with her hooked rug, *The Last Supper*.



Pearl McGown (1891-1983) is best known for helping bring about a resurgence of rug hooking in the 1930s and 1940s and gain it recognition as a folk art. She started making her own patterns in the 1920s and selling them to students. She is credited with over 1,000 hooked rug designs during her career. McGown wrote books on rug hooking techniques, offered workshops on wool dyeing and hooking, and hooked her own rugs. Some of her creations are on display at the Hooked Rug Museum of North America in Hubbards, Nova Scotia. The photo below is a Pearl McGown design (1950), hooked by Cheryl Orcutt.



Molly Nye Tobey (1893-1984) was the first woman graduate (1917) of the all-male New Bedford Textile School, allowed to matriculate on the condition she did not speak to the other students. She began to pursue rug hooking after graduation, while at the same time teaching art classes and running an antiques shop on Cape Cod. In 1942 after hooking rugs for sale and pleasure, she entered a needlework contest held in Madison Square Garden, which she won with a hooked rug inspired by her family's victory garden. As a result of this exposure, she was commissioned to hook a rug, which was crafted to honor the purchaser's home state of Missouri. The request inspired Tobey to hook a rug representing every state in the Union. The 50 rug project was begun in 1943 and continued into the early 1960s. The state rugs are now part of the permanent collection of the Shelburne Museum in Vermont.

The photo below is of a poster for the Shelburne Museum's 1993 exhibition "Soft to the Foot and Sweet to the Memory" which displayed Tobey's 50 state rugs.



Tobey's hooked rugs were featured in another Shelburne exhibition, some 25 years later. The photo below is one of her hooked rugs from the 2017 "Carpet Diem" exhibition.



Similar to quilts, hooked rugs also have a storytelling tradition. Storytelling with hooked rugs became more common as hooked rugs became more of a means of self-expression than a practical necessity. The book by Paulette Hackman, *Story Rugs and Their Storytellers: Rug Hooking in the Narrative Style* says "Mary Sheppard Burton, who died in 2010, was not the first creator of a story rug, but she remains one of the most productive and best loved of hood story artists. The presence of her twelve *Tell Me 'Bout Rugs* in the permanent collection of the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress testifies not only to the value of these rugs as stunning American craft but also to their value as pictorial documents about family life and events in twentieth century America."

Mary Sheppard Burton (1922-2010) grew up in the Tidewater region of coastal Maryland and lived in Germantown, Maryland. She began hooking rugs in the 1950s, inspired by rugs made by her minister's wife at a local class. Upon departing from commercial rug patterns and wools, she studied vegetable dying techniques and hand dyed all of her wool to obtain a more varied palette. Her rugs feature vibrant colors and designs inspired by early American history, nature, traditional Middle Eastern rugs, and family stories. She was especially interested in the origins of rug making in the United States and connecting them to her own practice.

Here are two of the rugs in the *Tell Me 'Bout Rugs* series.



When Pa Was Young - Skating the Bay
Edward Sampson Phipps (1993-94)



When Pa Was Young - The Tool Fetcher
Edward Sampson Phipps (1993)

All twelve of the rugs in the collection can be viewed at the link below.

<https://www.loc.gov/folklife/msburton/>