



DEVELOPING A HOME INDUSTRY: HOW THE ABNÁKEE RUG GREW OUT OF THE OLD-FASHIONED HOOKED MAT OF OUR GRANDMOTHERS: BY HELEN R. ALBEE

IT is more than eleven years since the first move was made toward establishing what is today known as the Abnákee rug industry. Those first steps in developing a new craft showed the same evidences of uncertainty and inexperience that we see in any baby learning to walk, but with this difference: there was no mother hand of tradition and precedent to direct the movement. For generations the home-made product known as hooked rugs had been made in farmhouses throughout New England, Canada and Nova Scotia, yet it seldom found a market and was not followed as a regular employment. It was wholly an individual work; and though here and there good examples were made, yet, for the most part, such rugs and mats represented merely a means of covering what would otherwise be bare floors, and of rescuing cast-off clothing from moths.

Many things conspired to make them ugly: first was the lack of suitable material,—for there were few gowns of bright holiday colors in the wardrobes of these thrifty, hard-working people, though there was an excess of old pantaloons, overalls, and dingy woolen garments that were dyed and redyed as long as there was a remnant left,—and out of this heterogeneous collection rose up and flourished the old hooked rug. All small pieces of gay-col-

ored cloth, either cotton or wool, were saved and sparingly distributed over a dun or drab rug in the form of flowers, autumn leaves, vines, animals, singing birds and even human faces. With no knowledge of art, and little skill in drawing, each woman was a law unto herself in the matter of design, and her ideas were supplemented and confirmed by the authoritative standard set by the stamped burlap offered in country stores, where in flaring colors these same crude themes were made even more pronounced and inartistic.

I state these facts not in a spirit of criticism, but as a matter of history; for it was from this parent stock that the Abnákee rug descended. That the latter does not more closely resemble the parent is due to the fact that I never saw any one hook a rug until I worked out the process for myself from verbal directions, and because of my ignorance of how others worked, the Abnákee rug is what it is.

I was told to work in straight lines and to bring my loops up so as to make an even surface on top; but as I cannot follow any line of rectitude long and seldom do the simplest thing twice alike my straight lines grew wobbly and wandered in many directions, and the loops were anything but uniform in height. As the pattern grew under my hands I noted that these transgressions produced an unexpected result.

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My vagarious departures broke up the severe straight-line effect in which each loop stood out distinctly as a loop; now they caught the light at different angles which gave slight variations of tone, and the separate loops were blurred into each other. Also, the rough surface with its loops of uneven height, when very slightly sheared, became a smooth texture of cut and uncut loops—for I clipped off only the tips of the highest—and this variety added still further to the play of color and the beauty of texture.

My next radical departure from established methods was to use new burlap instead of the pieces of old half-worn bagging that the farmer's wife finds in the barn. I tried several grades, such as are offered at wholesale in one hundred and fifty yard pieces, and have adopted one of smooth even weave, close texture—but not tightly woven—forty inches wide, made in Great Britain and bearing as a trade mark the letter D in a large triangle. I do not know the trade name of this particular quality, but I believe it to be exceptionally good, for I am asked to send it to all parts of the country by people who have first submitted their samples to me and find my grade superior. The best material is none too good, and it is an absolute necessity to use a stout foundation for a hooked rug. If the weave is too loose the loops of cloth will not hold firmly; if too close the threads of burlap tighten and pucker as the filling goes on and become almost impossible to work.

In my first experiments I tried many fabrics,—broadcloth, cheviot, nun's veiling, ladies' cloth, cashmere, mohair and several straight weaves. After eighteen months of futile search—for none of these was suitable for the work—I secured a few pieces of pure-wool twilled flannel such as was used for underwear before knitted goods came in. It proved an ideal texture for my purpose, and great was my disappointment when I learned that it was the last of a remnant lot, and if more were wanted a special order must be given to the mills, but that I must be responsible

for the entire order, if it were made up, as there was no call for such goods. It took considerable courage and faith in the enterprise to order five cases of six hundred yards each—but, as no other fabric was available, I gave the order. The particular quality I mean is a pure wool twill weighing from $3\frac{1}{4}$ to $3\frac{1}{2}$ ounces per yard, without sulphur bleach, cold pressed and woven without selvedge. Buying in large quantities at mill prices I have been able to supply other small industries with the best grade procurable at the same prices asked for mixed wool and cotton goods. In this way I get rid of my surplus stock and enable others to procure in small quantities superior material at a minimum cost.

Wholesale purchase of supplies is one point where established industries may, if they will, generously serve the general cause of handicrafts as well as their own personal interests; and it is well for them to consider that, in reducing the cost and in sharing reputable commodities with others, they help to establish any given craft upon a permanent basis in many places. Abnakee rugs were exhibited for four years at many arts and crafts societies, yet no one ventured into the field until I began to offer flannel, dyes, burlap, frames and hooks—none of which could be found in the retail markets. This enabled others to begin at a point which it took me years to reach, and in consequence of this policy my work is gradually taking on a new and larger character, for it is today more of an educational movement than an industry for producing rugs. Small independent centers of the work are established in every State of the Union, and it has been taken into many foreign countries, Labrador, Ireland, England, Canada, Nova Scotia, Hawaii, the Aleutian Islands—and this last summer a frame, hook, a manual of instructions and a small sampler of the finished work were sent to China. Experiments are also being made toward establishing the work as a permanent craft in many public institutions such as State industrial schools, insane hospitals, sanatoriums for the ner-

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vous, normal and high schools, kindergartens, art schools, arts and crafts societies and settlements in both city and country—all because suitable materials and instructions are placed at their disposal.

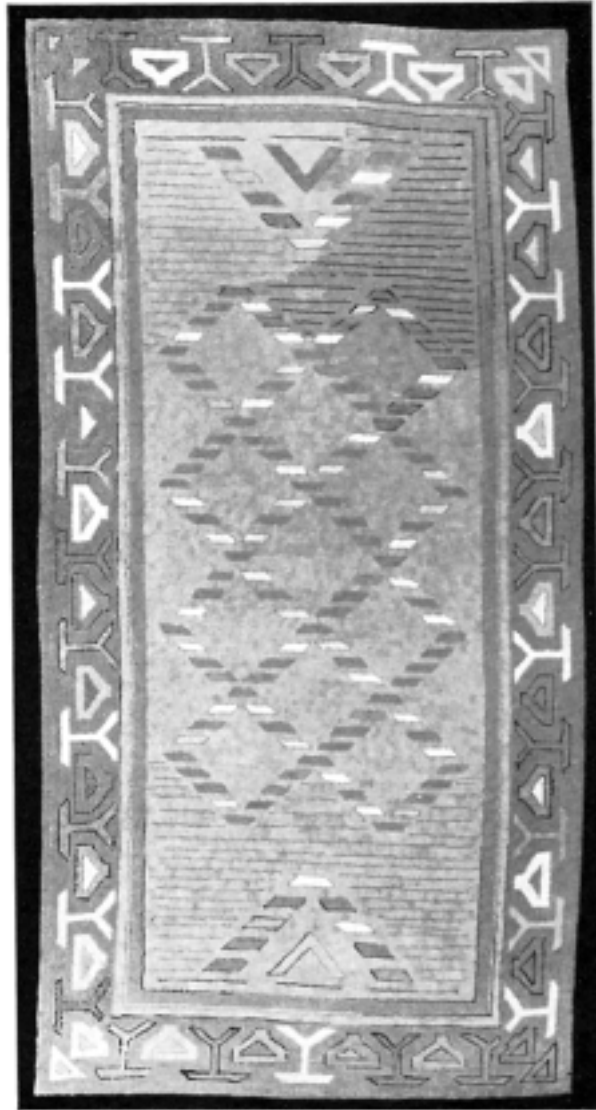
Many people are reluctant to buy material for rug-making, but, while first experiments may be made with old dress-goods, yet every argument is against the continued use of them. It was a common tragedy in making the old form of rug to have the material run short unexpectedly, and many a rug was spoiled, when almost completed, for want of a little more cloth,—for no makeshift could cover the deficiency. This is of course impossible where new goods are dyed for each rug, as I always allow an extra amount to meet every contingency. Warm tones of old rose, blue, dull reds, moss greens, and burnt orange are not found in gowns, and these are requisite for an artistic rug. Dress fabrics are either too thin or too thick for rug purposes. The old way was to cut strips quite wide and fold them three-ply in working, which made a rug as hard and unyielding as a board. With very narrow strips of a soft woolly twill a rug has the resilience of thick moss.

Aside from these considerations, the element of time and labor is important. In the early days I used a cashmere gown to make a small rug containing about six square feet, and the making consumed three weeks of hard labor. Later, with my twilled flannel, a rug of the same pattern containing seven square feet was finished and hemmed in sixteen hours, and later still I made a rug eight feet by four, of elaborate coloring and design, in three weeks, working only three hours a day,—thirty-two square feet in fifty-four hours. As labor represents one-third the cost of production in an Abnákee rug it is a matter of justice to the worker as well as economy to use material that fills rapidly.

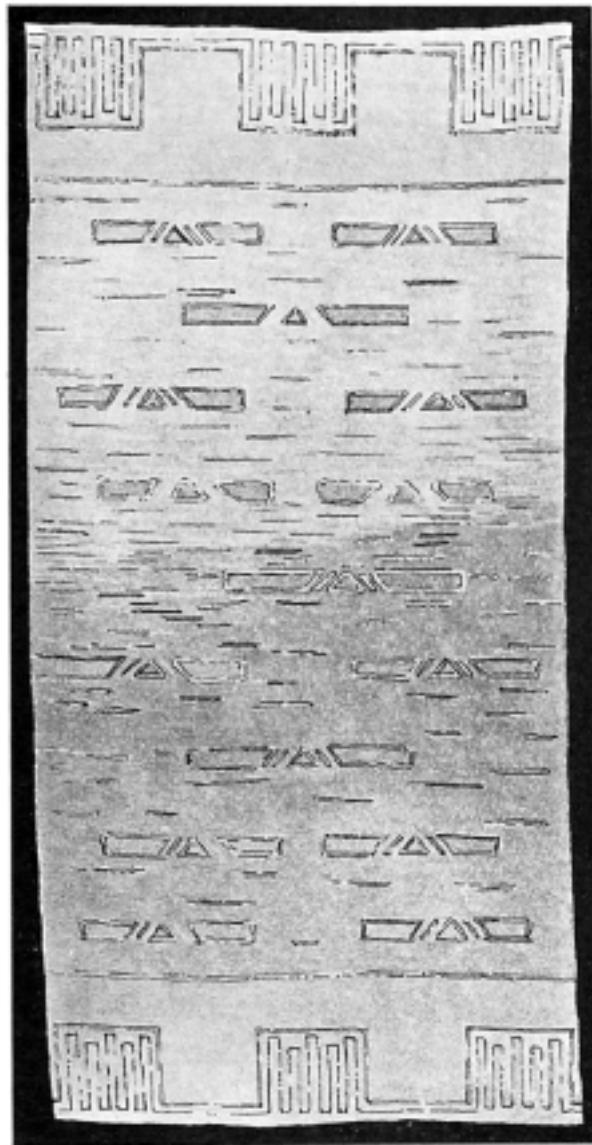
Perhaps the greatest departure made from the old rugs was in the character of the designs. They belonged to the days when it was the custom to decorate floor coverings with imitations of natural

objects, lilies and roses with impossible shading, garlands and baskets of flowers which, if real, would trip the unwary foot, cats and stags with purple eyes and magenta bodies, dogs and lions trying to look realistically ferocious. Naturally, all this kind of "art" had to be scrupulously avoided,—and also the copying of Oriental rugs. If one likes an Oriental rug, one wants the genuine article, not a copy. Yet, with this source of inspiration cut off, I pondered long over what was left for the designer. When one considers that the nations of the world have been making rugs for endless generations, at first glance it seems as if nothing remains but to copy their ideas more or less directly. Yet this attitude is fatal for the craftsman. His work has value only so far as it represents a fresh individual expression; the world has so little use for parodies that imitators are short-lived. With this conviction in mind I turned to primitive ornament,—North American Indian, South Sea Island, Peruvian, Mexican, Assyrian and Egyptian designs,—and in them found unlimited material for decorating rugs, as they show the use, in the most forcible and varied ways, of all sorts of simple elements such as squares, triangles, bars, bands, lines, characters and symbols of religious significance, decorative units built upon the straight line and angle.

At first all that I could do was to make direct copies of certain patterns, and combine portions of them to meet my needs, for it is well-nigh impossible for a lover of curves and arabesques to think originally in the terms of savage ornament. But I found as time went on that this study helped to simplify my thought, and I made a steady gain in coherence and force, not only in the application of design but in language and daily action. I believe a patient study of the best savage ornament has a profound psychological influence upon the whole nature as a corrective to the modern mind involved with the endless complexities of our present civilization. After several years' use of this form of ornament I find I can return to the



RUG DESIGN IN WHICH BARBARIC SYMBOLS
ARE USED IN THE BORDER.



RUG DESIGN SHOWING MRS. ALBEE'S
ADAPTATION OF PRIMITIVE FORMS.

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intricate ornament of the Moorish, Persian, Arabian, Japanese and Hindu, and extract simple elements adapted to my purposes. The very nature of the hooked rugs precludes fine details and elaborate patterns, for these are lost when worked with strips a little less than $\frac{1}{4}$ inch wide.

The manner in which design is applied to any given area is of great importance. The simplest and most conventional way is to surround a plain center with a border made of repeated units. The border may be further enriched by another very narrow border next to the edge of the rug; or there may be a second one added on the inner side next to the center. These little borders may or may not be enclosed by lines; in the latter case a variety may be given by letting the narrow inner border break into the plain center. This triple band of borders may be removed from the edge of the rug and placed a few inches within it, leaving a band of plain color,—usually the one used in the center,—at the edge of the rug.

Another treatment would be to run a four or five inch border all about a rug, and add two wide bands of a different pattern, placing them just inside the marginal border at the top and bottom of the rug. The plain field then presents a square or rectangle, in the center of which a small medallion or symbol may be placed. This arrangement produces a very beautiful effect even where the simplest units form the basis of the patterns.

A design may also be arranged with a plain ground and a border placed at either end, inclosed by lines or simply edged on the outer side with a plain band of color on which appears a little repeated unit, and the inner portion of the design may lie directly upon the plain center ground, uninclosed. If preferred, the plain ground of the rug may be broken by horizontal units placed at intervals. End borders may consist of a central figure or medallion with a symmetrical pattern running from it on either side to the edge; or it may be in one long panel resting on a band of plain color.

In my own industry I have worked out perhaps fifty designs, and I make a continued effort to secure some new arrangement of my ornament as well as a varied form in the elements composing it. The above descriptions indicate the principles upon which I proceed. Having first determined the space to be covered, I decide upon the general arrangement of the pattern, and the space it shall occupy, and then work out the details. I make a very small rough drawing of the completed rug, for in no other way can one determine proportions that will be pleasing. Keeping to these proportions I draw the design on an enlarged scale to the exact size required. Usually this larger drawing represents a quarter of the rug, though, if it is merely a border, I draw the corner and two or more units to be repeated. The pattern is then traced upon a light-weight quality of red press board such as is used to cover copy books. The size is twenty-eight inches by seventeen. When the design is traced, the stencil may be cut with a pair of small pointed scissors, and many bridges should be left so as to hold the design well together. I find scissors better than a knife; and the yellow oiled stencil paper that some recommend is of no use to me as it is very brittle and soaks easily in stamping.

After the stencil is cut it is varnished carefully on both sides and is dried thoroughly before it is used. To stamp a design I use a diluted solution of common bluing and apply it with a small nail brush that has a little handle raised on the back, which I find better than the usual stencil brush. A narrow flat brush is required at times where a line is to be drawn at the edge of the stencil on the burlap. It is not necessary to tack the stencil in stamping; merely hold it firmly in place with the left hand and scrub in the bluing lightly without moving the brush about much. Use as little of the liquid as possible and keep the stencil wiped dry as you go along. In the next paper I shall describe the frame and hook and the methods of work.