

CATALOGNE

OR PLAIN RAG RUGS.

Rag rugs, exactly as quilted bedspreads originated in times when woven fabrics were so precious that they had to be used to the last shred. Both techniques were entirely justified a century or two ago. They survived until now only in extremely poor countries, or through sheer habit if not inertia.

Rag rugs are economically obsolete, esthetically questionable, and technically of a very poor quality. But they are still being woven in huge quantities in certain countries.

The economics are wrong, because a normal household does not provide enough left-overs in fabrics to produce a significant yardage of rag rugs. Thus the fabrics must be bought and cut in strips sometimes with an expensive cutter, when for the same price real yarn could be used, and not only look better but also weave easier.

The texture is not satisfactory, because of the fraying edges of the strips, which show here and there as an unwanted and accidental pile or nap.

But the worst about rag rugs is that they are not practical, at least not when used as floor rugs, or runners - and they are hardly good enough for anything else.

We could improve the appearance (but not the wearing quality) by replacing cut strips with ribbons. But then the cost would be absolutely prohibitive. Heavy rug filler would be much cheaper. Actually the whole technique should be abandoned long ago. Its proper place is in a museum.

Still, if for sentimental reasons some weavers persist in producing this type of fabrics, they should at least improve the technique to make the rugs more durable.

What is wrong with the technique is this: the very heavy and strong weft, which surely could stand a lot of wear is "protected" by a very fine and weak warp which is exposed. It should be just the other way around. A typical rag rug is essentially a warp-face fabric, even if the weft because of its weight shows more than the warp. Quite often 16/2 cotton is used for warp, and set quite close, so that the

whole take-up is on the warp, when the weft stays fairly straight. The result is that, when used as a floor rug, the fabric desintegrates in no time, because a 16/2 cotton, or for that matter any yarn of this weight cannot resist the friction produced by shoe soles, particularly of hard rubber. Perhaps it was different when people still used mocassins, or took off their shoes before coming into the house.

If we have to have rag rugs they should be woven on the same principle as tapestry, or bound-woven fabrics. That is the warp should be strong and heavy and very open: carpet warp of the highest quality, or very heavy linen (8/3, 1½, etc.) set not closer than 8 ends per inch.

The weft should have a twist. It will prevent to a certain extent the accidental nap, or at least it will make it more uniform. The twist can be done by hand: attach a length of the cut strip to a door handle, stretch it and twist. This should not be overdone, or the weft will become kinky and difficult to handle.

In weaving we use either flat shuttles, or large rug shuttles with the weft placed loosely inside in shape of figure eight.

Plenty of weft must be left in each shed, and the beating should be hard but there is no necessity to cover the warp completely with weft, as in real bound weaving or tapestry.

We have now a fabric with a strong warp protected by a still heavier and stronger weft. Such a rug will last much longer than the standard "catalogne" for practically no extra work or expense. It will also look better. Patterns other than stripes in weft can be woven in Locked Wefts.

Only... once we go that far, why not make another step, and replace the cut strips with real yarn? Heavy cotton rug fillers are not expensive. They are continuous and can be wound on bobbins. The weaving will be easier, the choice of colours more dependable, and the general effect much better.

Much as we admire the old techniques, particularly of the 17-th and 18-th century, we have still to find a weaver of this period who would even mention rag-rugs as a legitimate weaving technique.
