

The Design of Hooked Rugs

I—PRIMITIVES

BY W. W. KENT

IF ONE wishes to learn how far the hooked rug has influenced the designing of both rugs and carpets in America, it is only necessary to talk with some of our most progressive manufacturers, the trend today being *very distinctly toward hooked rug motives* in both composition and color. Examination of the detail of the latest carpets shows surprisingly often that floral forms and geometrical composition and coloring are closely following not only the highest types of European and American hooking but also that the *primitive* conceptions of obscure farm and village workers are now coming into their own as never before.

Let us hope that the bizarre designs, the purely "crazy quilt" patterns, will not be done to excess. There are, to be sure, strange and queer compositions among them akin to modern or futurist handling, which are not only interesting, but of great merit and valuable as showing the way to a new development of the craft, while others are so bad as to excite the derision of both the lay public and even of broad minded designers and critics. Not that public taste is usually correct, for it is often led astray by novelties or

impressions made by flashiness and mere queerness, but in the long run we must consider both our public and the decisions of those designers who have justly been ranked high.

Bad designs are now so frequently before us in sales-rooms and the numerous private collections of eager amateurs that it is not necessary to give examples of them in illustrating this writing, but I hope in showing a few purely primitive plates of the better sort that it can be proved that we are indebted sometimes to unknown farm and village workers for ideas which have in them the germ of very high accomplishment, of very good and sometimes superlative rug and carpet design. See plates No. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6.

Why this is so, why we can often, from a mere even crude handling of an original design, later work upward from it to a high plane, must be because the original obscure workers, even though ignorant, unlettered and untaught, felt a breath, perhaps a little temporary breeze, of inspiration from his or her surroundings or conditions of life. It may have, indeed frequently did,

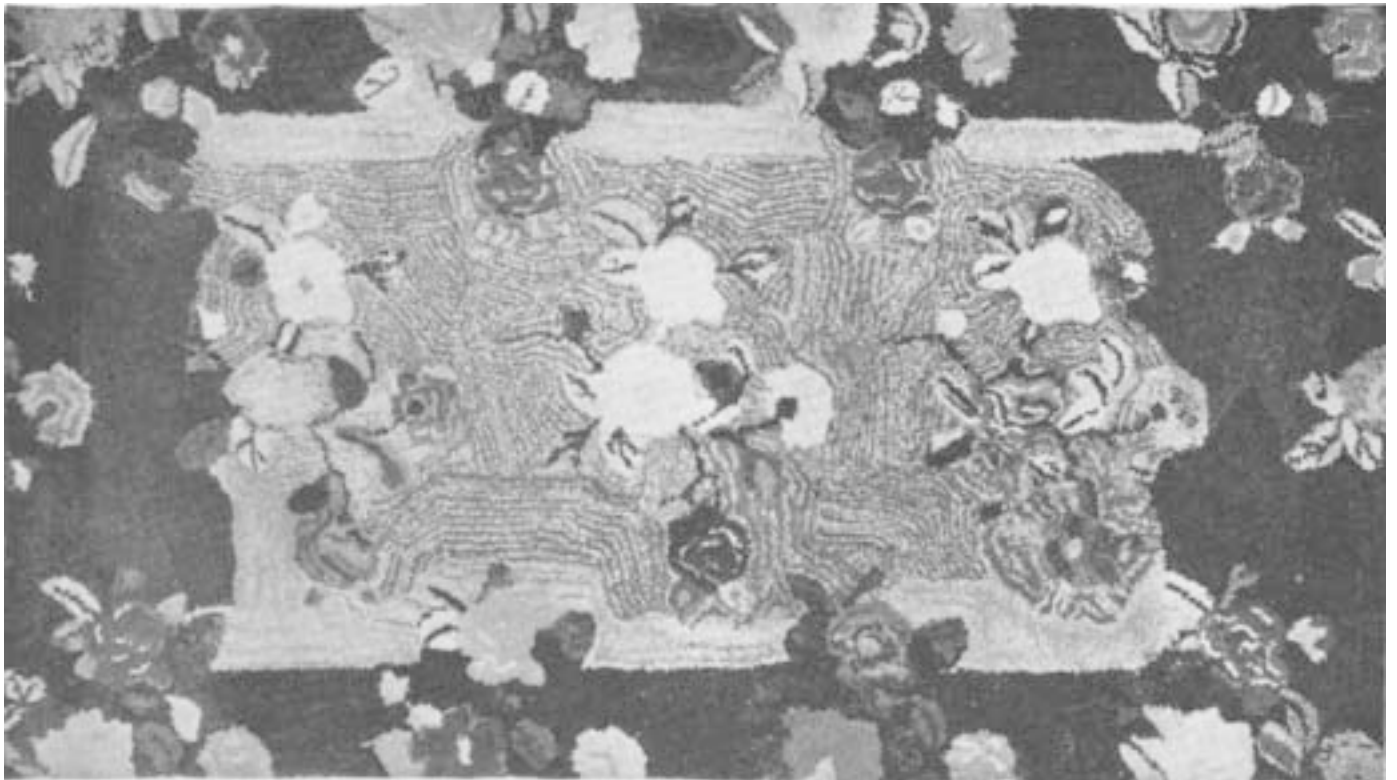


Plate I



Plate No. 2. Early American Hooked Rug. A naïve but perfectly balanced composition in color as well as in design. The design outlined in old rose, otherwise a very delicate combination of grays. Size, 3 feet 7 inches x 3 feet 2 inches.

Plate No. 3. Early American Hooked Rug, Farm type. Very effective, though primitive. Collection of Mrs. E. O. Schernikow, New York City.

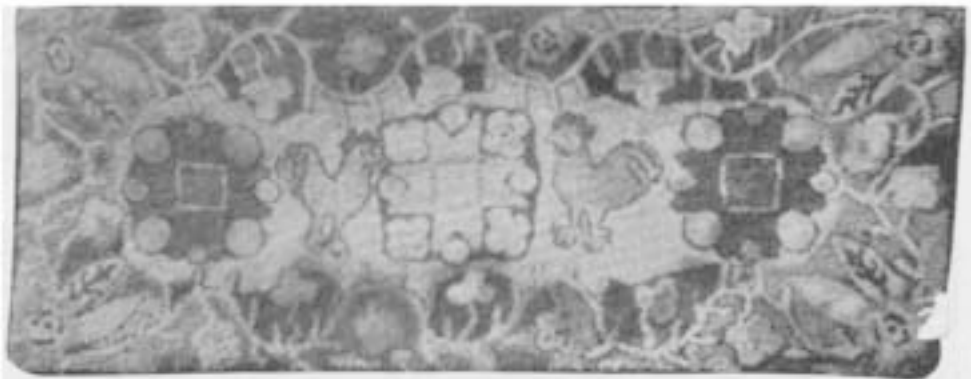
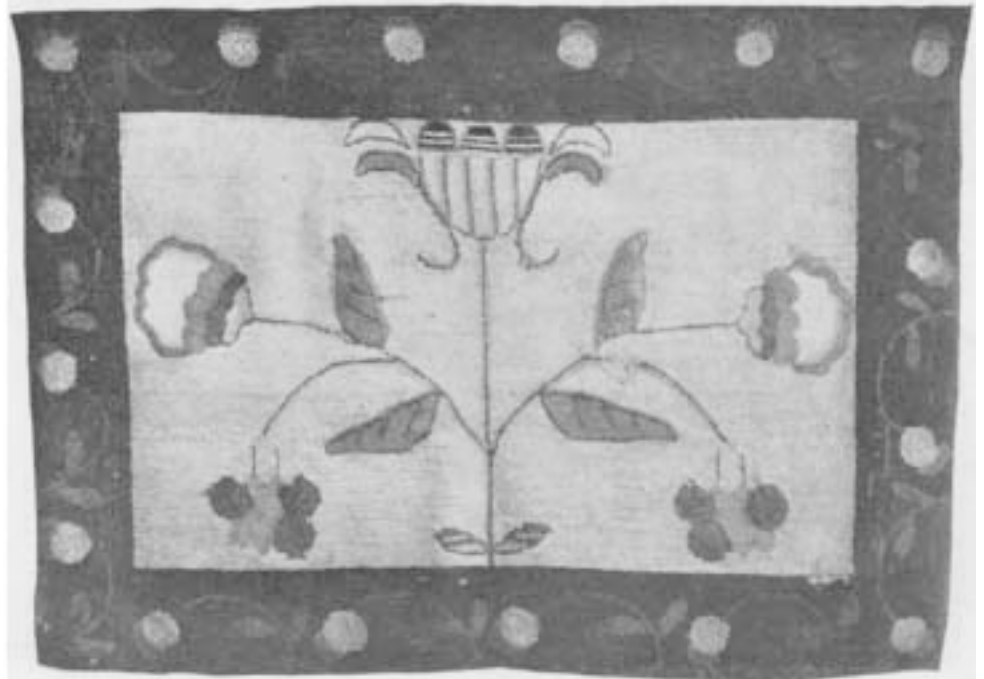


Plate No. 4. Rare Early American Hooked Rug. On heavy homespun linen mesh. Center has ivory field and archaic flowers and fruit with shield above. Gray black border and red and white flower spray. All materials homespun. Collection of Miss Traver — Courtesy of American Art Association and of Arts Magazine of Feb. 1925.



come from an almost desperate wish to escape the banality of house or farm work by some heretofore untried means, to do something which was so engrossing as to steep the mind in an almost Oriental dream of the unusual or romantic. We all, rich and poor, seek the spice of variety in many ways and (perhaps too often) will resort to the stimulant easiest to obtain, but while liquor, coffee and tea, etc. have indeed made us their debtors for brief and productive stimulation, the rug worker often got from the flower garden, the landscape or his own dwelling, something which moderns can only obtain from the same sources or from studying this expression of the early work as to what he saw and so roughly noted.

We must therefore look at crude early rug designs carefully and fairly to decide whether there is in any one the elusive motive or idea which turned the growing rug into a magic carpet for its maker, on which he or she floated safely away from feeding the pigs, washing dishes, dusting or even from the poetry of milking time. That is a poetic escape as you know for many people even in these mechanical days of overproduction, which we much too strongly blame as the cause of The Big Crash.

To quote from certain notes I made for a talk about hooking rugs in the recent N. Y. "Hobby Show," I saw, long years ago, both primitive and sophisticated designs

in a Boston shop. There was a charm about them all, just as many children are charming even with somewhat dirty faces or when they laugh at you over slices of bread and butter and molasses. Children are attractive even when a little mussed and dirty and so are many hooked rugs especially the ones from Maine farms. Some in that shop came from Waldoboro perhaps and many in fact from Orono, Me. In Waldoboro beautiful ones seem almost to have grown on bushes ready for some wise dealer, like Burnham of Ipswich or Creamer of Waldoboro to pick. Some possibly from New Hampshire before anyone could stop them among the latter crowds of appreciative collectors who first in these latter days loved the beauty, saw their intrinsic worth and the charm and value of the craft that had produced them. From Nova Scotian Acadia, perhaps one or two had floated in. If so they were the best of all, we know now. I can't recall all the designs of strange flowers that never grew anywhere short of Mars, but they fascinated me. In them were fine color blending, good composition and strange and fascinating technique besides the evidence of their earnest creation by fond and careful, though untrained, craftspeople, men and women shut off from cities in the deep snows of northern winters who wrought as well and

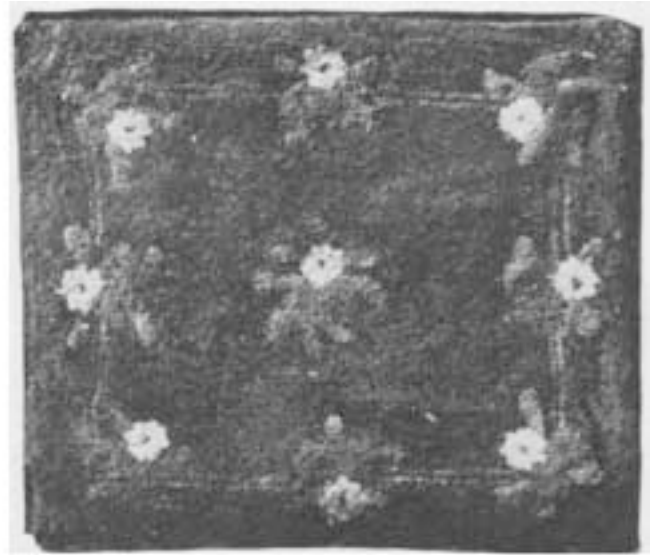


Plate No. 8. Pink flowers and green leaves with brown stems on a dark brown and blue field. The three, though primitive, show real feeling for composition.

patiently and enthusiastically as they could. Some were very beautiful, some horribly homely no doubt, although



Plate No. 5. Farm Animals. Coll. of Mrs. Lathrop Brown. Not unlike bas-reliefs on stones of underground temple uncovered at Malta about 20 years ago.

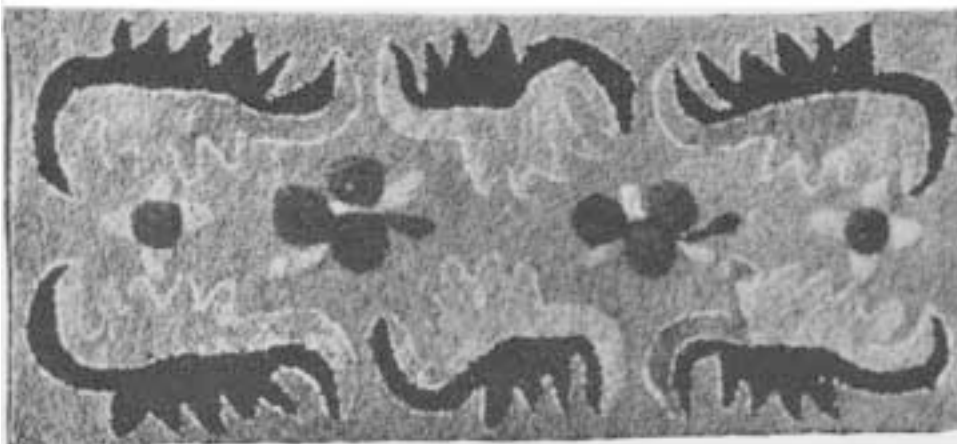


Plate No. 6. Mrs. E. Gutchell, Maker, Vanceboro, Me. Yellow Gray field, black and pink scrolls and red flowers. Interesting brilliancy and modelling of raised flowers.

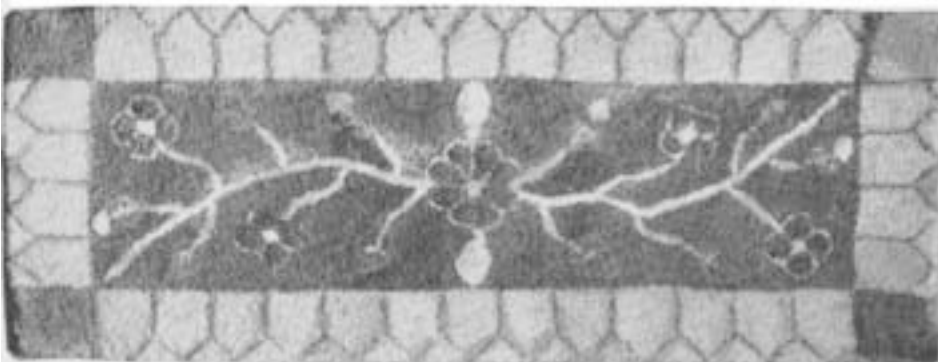


Plate No. 7. Bedside Rug 24" x 54", W. W. K. Coll. Brown flowers, blue stems and buds on speckled black field, varied border in black outlined lozenges of blue, yellow, brown, gray, etc.



Plate No. 9. Colors, source and owner unknown, but is of chipped wool and probably Scotch workmanship

I've forgotten any of that sort. All were sincere, of the soil, as well as often soiled, just as they came from floors and hard usage in many homes. They were the output of people who could not loaf long, who must keep hands and mind alert to combat the wear and tear of the daily fight for bread. One wished he could see these people, talk with them, tell them their work was good, that there was in it more than bread and butter to be gained, that many other people of the cities who would see these rugs could sympathize with those who made them, could tell them of their own ancestors who came from similar farms in New and Old England, Scotland, Ireland and Scandinavia. They, these workers, had indeed made magic carpets for they swiftly bore my mind searchingly away, as in the Eastern story, and backward to the scenes of boyhood in Maine. Although I never had knowingly seen a hooked rug before, nor strangely enough ever heard my New

England parents speak of this art of which they indeed must have known, I seemed to find them familiar.

Since the question of the origin of "hooking" was raised by me and discussed and its practice by early, even very ancient, Scandinavians was discovered, as told in detail in my book "The Hooked Rug," a considerable research (to learn whether it even preceded weaving and kept pace with that discovery), an interesting research has begun in America and England and probably in Germany. Professor Rudolf Riefstahl of New York, the well known authority on Oriental rugs and other early crafts and activities, tells me that he is inclined to favor my supposition that Coptic wool mats or fabrics of a shaggy sort were done by hooking and not pulled tight by needle work over a stick or rod as many people averred. This, if so, and as my book suggests, makes our study of Primitives in rugs even more engrossing and valuable for the craft.



Plate No. 10. Beautiful in color. Hooked rug, from Coll. of Mr. John S. Burk, Vice-Pres. of B. Altman & Co. Size 2' 2" x 5'. Interest for designers lies in architectural character.