The impulse to cover interior surfaces has historically been both utilitarian and decorative. Rugs in particular have been a ubiquitous presence in American interiors since the seventeenth century, whether displayed on the bed, the table, the floor, or, more recently, the wall. Because of their prominent placement and the physical area they occupied, rugs became opportunities for strong visual statements. As many surviving rugs beautifully attest, the best examples transcend function through their graphic power—color and design—and are now considered masterworks. Early American rugs were yarn sewn, shirred, appliquéd, and embroidered; later techniques included knitting, crocheting, and most notably hooking. Hand-sewn and hooked rugs were once appreciated only within the intimate confines of the home. Today, their public enjoyment provides a fascinating glimpse into the private spaces of American life. “The Great Cover-up: American Rugs on Beds, Tables, and Floors” is the American Folk Art Museum’s first comprehensive rug exhibition since 1974, when Joel and Kate Kopp organized the seminal “American Hooked and Sewn Rugs: Folk Art Underfoot,” which generated an enormous interest in the field that continues to this day.
Bed Rugs

Some of the earliest handcrafted American rugs were produced by women in their homes and used as bedcovers. Known as bed rugs, (derived from the Norwegian rug or rosga and also the Swedish rug, referring to a coarse fabric or pile covering), these monumental textiles were typically yarn sewn, a technique executed in a running stitch. Highly valued by their makers, they were often signed or initialed and dated. Bed rugs were symbols of wealth and status. Production was labor intensive, and examples were treasured by owners who used them during cold New England winters. Most surviving examples are from the Connecticut River Valley, but bed rugs also have been located in other parts of New England and elsewhere.1

Though no seventeenth-century examples of bed rugs survive, references appear in American inventories and other documents from this period. Fortunately, a small number of extraordinary eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century bed rugs exist, such as the superbly designed and executed Bed Rug made in 1803 by a member of the prestigious Fairbanks family of New Hampshire (right). Its predominant carnation motif, which is similarly incorporated in a significant group of about a dozen surviving bed rugs from the Connecticut River Valley, relates to stylized sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English and other European floral embroidery designs.2 Decorative elements of this kind were brought to America via embroidery-pattern books printed in England; in some cases, these were translated from German, French, and Italian sources dating to the sixteenth century.3 The carnation surrounding a foliate arabesque appears on a page in Richard Shorleyker’s 1632 pattern book, A Schole-house for the Needle.4

Like the rose, the carnation is often emblematic of earthly and divine love; for this reason, it is often associated with brides, bridegrooms, and newly married couples.5 This motif has persisted in needlework patterns for centuries and is prevalent in border patterns of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English and American embroidered samplers. Varieties of the flower are found in needlework of other European countries as well. In the Fairbanks Bed Rug, the central carnation bouquet rises symmetrically from a graceful double-handled oval urn. The composition’s similarity to that of numerous other textiles of the era and especially the presence of the oft-fractured urn shape strongly suggest a common design source for the overall pattern.6 Surrounding the central motif are graceful arched and meandering vines and leaves. Tulips and other blossoms fill the ground space between the central pattern and the prominent four-sided surround, adding rhythmic movement and strong patterning to the surface design. The few colors—a palette of brown, gold, and some related red tones—vibrate dramatically on the black background.

The Packard Bed Rug (opposite) inscribed N/BP1806, is one of at least three bed rugs made by Packard family members of Jericho, Vermont.6 The contained floral and geometric elements are reminiscent of strapwork, an ornamental scrollwork often seen in Mannerist decoration. The design, in flat, uncut pile with scallop motifs, also shows the influence of Transylvanian-type rugs with strapwork designs seen covering tables in some colonial portraits.7 Similarly designed hand-knotted pile carpets, called Turkeywork, were imported to the American colonies
from Europe. Designs were absorbed into the Ameri-
can sensibility and integrated in several of the decora-
tive arts. The individual floral and leaf motifs of the
English imitation embroderies that may have had similar sources and decorative
counterparts. The scale-patterned outer border, popular in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century decorative
textiles. The spare elements feature a house with
two gable-end chimneys and a nearby church linked by
a double length of fencing that borders a path; this
establishes in symbolic terms the close tie between home
and church that was fundamental in American life at the
time. The unusual three-dimensional Schwenkfelder Table
Cover (opposite) from Pennsylvania features a table set-
ning appliquéd and embroidered on a wool foundation.
Appliqued table and hearth rugs became popular around
1840. Appliqué—a technique also used in quilmak-
ing—involves cutting elements from one fabric and
stitching them onto another. It allows for much greater
flexibility than can be attained in piece textiles. The
dimensional objects—floor place settings and a planter
with a neat arrangement of fruits and vegetables—may be
likened to whimsical contemporary soft sculpture. The
shockingly realistic scene of the rarely spirit found in
Schwenkfelder fraktur examples.

The elite practice of placing rugs on tabletops was
established in symbolic terms the close tie between home
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the three-dimensional rug style became so pervasive that all rugs with relief surfaces, such as this one, which features several prominent birds, are termed “Waldoboro type” no matter where they originated or which motifs were used.

American floor rugs were also braided, crocheted, knitted, or woven, and sometimes their makers combined techniques. The striking Knitted Rug (page 34) attributed to Elvira Curtis Hulett is a tour de force of rugmaking. Hulett, a member of the Shaker community in Hancock, Massachusetts, used a glowing autumnal palette, and her rug is knitted in a complex construction of concentric rings patterned with crosses, stripes, diamonds, checkerboards, and strips of contrasting colored wool yarns, giving evidence of the maker’s early experience as a weaver. (Hulett’s name appears on an early nineteenth-century pattern draft for huckaback, a woven fabric.) It is further embellished on the outer ring with embroidered cross-stitching, forming chevrons, and bound with a braided edge. Strick

Burlap, a coarse woven fabric made of fiber from the sturdy jute plant, imported from India by about 1850, was commonly used for sacks to handle dry goods such as coffee, tea, tobacco, and grains, thus providing an inexpensive and readily available cloth to be used as a rug foundation. Hooked rugs bear resemblance to yarm-sown rugs in that both rugmaking techniques result in raised loops that can be left as they are or clipped to produce a pile. As
opposed to the earlier technique of yarn-sewing, which opposed to the earlier technique of yarn-sewing, which employed a running stitch on a wool or linen foundation, rug hooking is accomplished by pushing a hook through the top of a coarse foundation (such as burlap) and looping the fabric from the underside to the top. A near endless variety of designs can be created by using raw materials as diverse as cut-up rags, fabric scraps encased in old clothes or linens, and yarn. Hooked-rug designs range from repeated geometric patterns to detailed embroidered portraits.

Printed patterns had become available in the 1850s from Chambers and Leland, in Lowell, Massachusetts, which stenciled embroidery patterns and prepared patterns on burlap. Capitalizing on the growing popularity of handmade rugs in the late nineteenth century, an enterprise Maine tin paildecker, Edward Sands Foster, introduced preprinted hooked-rug patterns on burlap in the 1860s. In 1876, when Frost sold his business, he had about 180 patterns. Today, 742 zinc stencils that made 133 different patterns survive. Frost’s subjects ranged from florals and animals to patriotic and frontier designs and countless geometric novelties.

Frost’s success led other individuals and companies to print patterns. In 1886, Ebenezer Ross, of Toledo, Ohio, invented the punch needle to replace the crocheted rug hook, and he sold this new hook along with a catalog of fifty-six patterns, mostly Frost designs. By the early twentieth century, prepackaged kits were widely available. Creative rug hookers often altered the preprinted patterns to synthesize individualized results.

The Lion No. 7 pattern, in which a lion reclines amid thin leafy foliage in front of a standing lion cub, was Frost’s most successful pattern. Its popularity led other entrepreneurs to alter it somewhat and continue to market the design on preprinted burlap. In Ross’s variation of the pattern, used for the Lion No. 73 Plains rug (right), the foliage is changed to palm trees. In a third marketed version, the palm trees remain but the lion cub is absent.

The mass production of Edward Sands Foster’s patterns set the stage for the development of cottage industries. Among the most long-lived and successful was that spearheaded by Dr. Wilfred Grenfell. In 1892, Grenfell arrived in the Canadian province of Labrador and Newfoundland on a hospital ship and founded a mission to help the villagers there augment the subsistence income derived from hunting, trapping, and the production and sale of handicrafts. For several months each year, the ferocity of lagers there augment the subsistence income derived from the hunt. Grenfell himself made cartoon images for some of the designs, but it was Rhoda Dawson, who arrived in Labrador in 1930 from England to assist Grenfell rugmaker M.A. Pressley-Smith prepare rug-hooking kits, who raised the artistic level of Grenfell mats by introducing bold abstract color palettes and formal, bold abstraction reflect the modernist taste of the first decades of the twentieth century. The flat pile is reminiscent of the densely hooked rugs produced around the same time at the Grenfell Mission. There has been a resurgence of interest in handmade rugs by both amateurs and professionals. Some talented creators continue to design and make rugs for profit in the spirit of cottage industries. A larger number, however, comprise a community of rug hookers who support regional, national, and international guilds and associations, publications, and exhibitions of handmade rugs. Through their motivations may differ from those of their gifted predecessors, makers of rugs, past and present, share a need for self-expression. Today, exceptional historical and contemporary rugs are displayed on walls and valued for their aesthetic and documentary qualities, as well as for their interpretation of the nomenclature, implements, and tenets of the craft.

Grenfell encouraged local women to make mats during these months of enforced idleness, and these mats were marketed throughout North America. Early in the early years of the mission, when seal hunting was basic to the economy, providing food, clothing, dog harnesses, and household goods for the community. Symbolic meanings are embedded into the seemingly cryptic early twentieth-century Degree of Pocahontas Hooked Rug (page 44, top). The Degree of Pocahontas was the female counterpart of the Imperial Order of Red Men, a fraternal organization formed to promote freedom for the colonies that traces its origins to several secret groups founded before the American Revolution, including the Sons of Liberty (1765). The ladies auxiliary, established in the late nineteenth century, took its name from the storied daughter of the chief of the Algonquin Indians who was held hostage by English settlers at Jamestown. She became a pivotal figure in reestablishing peaceful relations between the settlement and the Indian nation after a period of hostility. This hooked rug is replete with symbols relating to the moonstone, implements, and tenets of the organization, whose motto was “Freedom, Friendship, and Charity.” The inscription GDS 415 (or AD 1932) commemorates the date that the “fourty-fifth Great Sun Council Fire of the Great Council of the United States” convened at Ton Ton Hall, in New York. The arrows and suns are symbols of war, the white dove a symbol of peace. The pictorial hooked rug Praying to the Moon (page 44, bottom) epitomizes the originality of American folk art. The unusual composition depicts a couple facing away from each other and surrounded by a bold geometric patterned with hearts. The woman extends her arms gracefully—becoming in a sense a totem pole—above a tree. The scene hints at romance, courtship, love, and marriage. In her appeal to the moon, often associated with a feminine aspect, the woman appears to be praying to fulfill her desire for the handsome gentleman depicted on the left. The exact meaning remains open to interpretation, but this seems a safe reading, given that the universal subjects of love and courtship have been identified with the moon and its reflected light in literary and musical works throughout history.

Le Sieur, the museum’s curator of public programming and special exhibitions, is the curator of “The Great Cover-up: American Rugs on Beds, Tables, and Floors.”

Notes
1. In 1994, the museum presented the exhibition “Northern Sunnies: Hooked Art of the Grenfell Mission,” organized by Paula Lovery, which specifically explored the Canadian hooked mats produced in Labrador and Newfoundland.
5. See Marcus Huish, Samples and Pattern embroideries (New York: Dover Publications, 1970), pp. 21; Frankly and Brown, op. cit., pp. 14–15; and Callister and Warren, op. cit., which shows similar related examples—eight with the urn and the flower.

LION WITH PALM / artist unidentified; pattern by E. Ross & Co. Manufacturers, Toledo, Ohio / United States / c. 1880 / wool on burlap / 42 × 67” / collection of Jeff Pressman and Nancy Kollisch

PRAISING TO THE MOON / artist unidentified; pattern by E. Ross & Co. Manufacturers, Toledo, Ohio / United States / c. 1880 / wool on burlap / 41 × 64” / private collection

WALDOBORO-TYPE HOOKED RUG / artist unidentified; Maine / 1860 / wool on probably burlap / 25 × 23” / collection of Paolo Lavery

SOLITARY TREE HOOKED RUG / artist unidentified; Ontario / 1897–1922 / wool on burlap / 32 × 56” / private collection

FOOTNOTES

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8. According to descendants who donated another example to the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Mich., Rachel Packard of Joritch, Vt., was 12 years of age when she spun, woven, and dried the yarn used in that bed rug, dated 1805. See also Callister and Warren, op. cit., p. 57.


17. Ibid., p. 393.

18. Ibid., p. 384.


20. Flint, op. cit.


23. Ibid., op. cit., p. 284.


27. Ibid.


29. For the most complete discussion of the missionary work of Dr. Wilfred Grenfell and the hooked mats of the Grenfell Mission, see Paula Laverty, Silk Stocking Mats: Hooked Mats of the Grenfell Mission (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005).

30. Ibid., p. 35.

31. Ibid., p. 38.