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Art Review | 'The Great Cover-Up'

When Home Was Where the Art Was

By ROBERTA SMITH

One of the continuing rhetorical questions of our artistic era, asked in a 1971 essay by the art historian Linda Nochlin, is "Why have there been no great women artists?" One answer was already at large, thanks to Virginia Woolf, who put it this way in 1929 in "A Room of One's Own": "For most of history, Anonymous was a woman."

In other words, there have probably been outstanding female artists since the time of the caves and throughout the centuries and the cultures in which most artists were anonymous. They probably persisted in the last 500 years of Western art, but since women were largely shut out of academies, they rarely worked in traditional painting and sculpture, didn't have prominent careers and were not noted by either their contemporaries or subsequent historians. We may never know their names, any more than we know the names of many of the great sculptors of 19th-century Africa.

A case in point is "The Great Cover-Up: American Rugs on Beds, Tables and Floors," an extraordinary exhibition at the American Folk Art Museum. It contains the work of dozens of great artists who were also women and usually anonymous, or "unidentified" as labels put it these days. (The makers of 13 works are identified; even in the unlikely event that half of the remaining 50 or so who aren't are men, that adds up to three dozen women.)

The rugs' images run to lions, horses, home sweet home, flowers, landscapes, historical personages. But the portrayals tend to be densely textured and gloriously colored, with flattened, modernistic spatial effects or geometric patterns. Bold scale is the norm, as is a generally exuberant frontality. They may be rugs, but along with Navajo blankets they are some of the best pictorial art of 19th- and early-20th-century America.

The show fills two floors with 60 rugs for beds, tables or hearthstones and other textiles, including two handmade carpets. One floor is devoted to mostly embroidered, yarn-sewn, appliquéd or chenille works from 1800 to 1895; the other to hooked rugs from 1860 to 1950.

Despite the darkened walls and conservationally correct dim lights, nearly all of these works are attention grabbers that first look naïve and awkward and then start to unfold, revealing a sustaining intuitive intelligence. Each is a kind of contest in which material has been wrestled into an image but continues to put up a fight. They once more assert that modern form is not a modern invention, and that the distinction between art and craft is at best provisional.

Most of the rugs in this show are the work of women who set out to make their homes quieter, warmer, prettier and more hospitable and were drawn into something deeper, grander and at times really wild, at least spatially. Ambition and personal expression superseded the task, and a work of art resulted: an object as visually powerful and nurturing as it was useful, if not more so. Some of these textiles seem as thick as bearskins and can't have been easy to use. But usability may not always have been the first priority.

In one of the wall labels Lee Kogan, the museum's curator of

special exhibitions, who organized the show, notes that sometimes the rugs were made to hang on walls, like paintings. In other words, Anonymous was not only a woman; in some cultures she was also a painter by other means, whose accomplishments were not lost on so-called real artists.

Consider the way the flower still lifes that regularly punctuate this show bring to mind the fistlike flowers of the early American modernist painter Marsden Hartley. Then forget about Hartley and look at the way each rug refreshes a time-worn motif with a different idea about space, scale, petal formations and the flexibility of stems.

The rugs were clearly an occasion to think big, sometimes by merely scaling up the familiar motifs of traditional samplers. One standout is an appliquéd and embroidered table rug made in Maine around 1840. The scale of a medium-size landscape painting, it finely enumerates standard sampler subjects of home and church. Rows of picket fence curve to imply a hill and emphasize distance. The smaller church is farther away from us than the house; three trees also occupy different depths. This spatial scheme asserts itself despite a ground of solid black wool whose deeply indented saw-tooth edges suggest a crude, comical fringe as well as the maw of some large cartoon monster. And please note that each saw-tooth has saw-tooth edges of its own.

Sometimes an almost overwhelming monumentality prevails. Imagining some of these pieces in the small low-ceilinged rooms of 19th-century rural America makes their ambition even more tangible. In two yarn-sewn bed rugs, scrolling peasant-art floral patterns suggest use by giants. One, attributed to Deborah Leland Fairbanks (1739-91) of Littleton, N.H., is a densely packed thistle pattern in

carefully controlled ochres and yellows. The other, made in Jericho, Vt., in 1806 by an unidentified member of the Packard family, features subtly geometric flowers in shades of red, white and blue. Persian carpets come to mind, as do American Indian beadwork and the embroidered silks of pre-Revolutionary France, only 20 times bigger.

Large scale could also result from addition rather than magnification, as with the magnificent Caswell Carpet, made by Zeruah Higley Guernsey Caswell (1805 to about 1895) of Castleton, Vt., over three years starting in 1832, when she turned 27 and must have seemed on the brink of spinsterhood. Measuring roughly 12 feet by 12 feet, it is a large field of individual chain-stitch embroideries on wool — 8 across and 10 down — in which the desire for a mate is palpable. (One eventually materialized.) Note the progress, right to left, of embroideries depicting solitary birds, then pairs of lovebirds, then birds thrusting worms into the mouths of hungry offspring.

Other images on the carpet include a courting couple and household pets on striped rugs, but the dominant motifs are a wonderfully varied array of plants and flowers that seem, well, quite ripe, although the pink-lined seashell in the upper left may encourage this interpretation. Regardless, if these squares were individual paintings, they would form an entire career.

The traffic between rugwork and painting is heavy. It is clearest in a 1922 hooked rendition of a quasi-Cubist nude wreathed in flowers, by the American modernist Marguerite Zorach (1887-1968). Edward Hicks's "Peaceable Kingdom" paintings are the likely precedent for the many lions here, the best of which is a doleful creature in blues and grays with Bette Davis eyes. The prize for spatial complexity goes to a

hooked rug labeled “All Had a Good Time” from 1930-50. The eye glides in over a small grassy city square full of picnicking, frolicking or skirmishing parents, children and dogs. An exploding red form indicates that it is the Fourth of July; an impressive range of facial expressions capture different holiday moods. Best of all, every single form reads as upright and part of a coherent space and paper-doll flat, embedded in the thick surface.

Two abstract rugs made in 1800 and 1825 — one by Mary Peters, the other by an unidentified artist — seem to clear the way for Kandinsky, while an unusual knitted circular table rug from the 1890s edges a spiraling center with concentric bands in a way Robert Delaunay might have happily claimed. It is attributed to Elvira Curtis Hulett, a member of the Shaker community in Hancock, Mass. And perhaps the final word comes from a small hooked rug of Niagara Falls, made in the 1920s, in which the blues and whites of the plunging water and the green banks have been reinforced with oil paint.

This artist is, like most here, “unidentified,” which optimistically holds out the possibility that the situation could change. In the meantime this exhibition taps into a current of indigenous ad hoc creativity whose voltage is undiminished.

“The Great Cover-Up: American Rugs on Beds, Tables and Floors” continues through Sept. 9 at the American Folk Art Museum, 45 West 53rd Street, Manhattan; (212) 265-1040.

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