A NEW ENGLAND VILLAGE INDUSTRY BY MRS. HELEN R. ALBEE

WITH the revival of handicrafts has come a renewed interest in some of the almost forgotten hand-work of former generations. Hand-looms and spinning-wheels are recovered from garrets and set to new uses. Old samplers and bead-work are studied with fresh impulse, and old furniture and brass ornaments serve as models to the young craftsman. It is good to see America reverting to these ancient relics, for they were made in a day when simple designs, elegance in form, and integrity of material were more valued by the people at large than at the present time. It is only by comparing old silver and pewter, and antique furniture with illustrated catalogues of modern manufactures, that one realizes how meretricious are these latter products in their over-ornamentation and incongruous lines.

Among these recoveries from the past there is one article of domestic make which had never achieved distinction, and hence has received little attention from craftsmen, although it is perhaps the freshest and most promising of them all in its undeveloped possibilities. I refer to the New England hooked rug.

For a long time it puzzled me to understand why an article that came so near to excellence as the average hooked rug should be so needlessly ugly. As commonly seen, these rugs are in block patterns, in “hit and miss” grounds, or they are supposed copies of the crazy quilt; all of which are mild and inoffensive as compared with the great woolly roses, sprawling vines, red or purple cats, or blue stags’ heads which have none of the delightful grotesqueness of Japanese or Chinese monsters, but are representations, hopelessly cheap and vulgar, of natural objects. In the course of my observations I found that much of this seeming lack of taste was the result of necessity. These rugs had been made from the cast-off clothing of members of hard working families in which black, brown and drab furnished the serviceable colors of their garments. The flaring
scarlet I had thought so objectionable, was derived from worn-out red flannel shirts and petticoats; and light, or bright colored cloth, was to be had only through the passing of some holiday gown, as rare a thing as the holidays themselves. Thus the cherished gay colors were quenched in the preponderance of sad and dun shades, and where the former were used, they were distributed with little taste or imagination, and resulted in mere patches of brightness which took the form of vines, flowers and animals on dull grounds.

Long experience and disappointment had taught these thrifty housewives that their cloth was liable to run short before any rug was finished. Therefore many persons did not attempt definite designs, but resorted to the blocks, the "hit or miss," the patchwork effects, or any pattern which permitted their colors to spend as they would. It must be remembered also that these rugs were made in rural districts, remote from the influence of books, pictures and art. With no models to guide them, the women made crude imitations of the natural objects which they saw about them. In the desire to make from otherwise useless material a durable covering for cold, bare floors, it is not strange that the Utilitarian spirit all but destroyed any artistic feeling. What was made by the mother was handed down and preserved by the daughter, until purple cats reposing amid parti-colored foliage and woolly roses became the unimpeachable standard of taste.

To me all this is pathetic, as it evinces an instinctive love of form and color on the part of the workers, and a total absence of the capacity to express it.

About six years ago a New York artist suggested to me that trained designers should give some attention to the matter and, through the use of good material, warm coloring, and suitable designs, endeavor to raise the hooked rug to the level of an artistic
product. As I had made my home in a remote community among the White Mountains where the native women were familiar with this work, his suggestion appealed to me, and I began to make experiments. After six years of labor, I can say that the results have far exceeded my hopes. The possibilities of the work are well nigh inexhaustible, and the limitations practically none. With proper material the work is rapid and fascinating. A skilful workwoman can do from two to three square feet a day and not work over five hours. By the use of an improved adjustable frame, only a small portion of the rug is put on the frame at once, which prevents the strained and cramped position necessary under old conditions. Through the use of a soft, all-wool, twilled flannel, a texture is secured which is as thick and as yielding as moss, and which acquires with wear a soft, velvety sheen.

With my intimate knowledge of the matter, I can say without any qualification that I know of no field where a craftsman is so free to work out his ideas, or where originality and talent are assured such great success as in rug making. Since the work is done wholly by hand, an infinite variety of effects can be produced, and one is not hampered by the limitations of machinery of any sort. The tools necessary are a simple pine frame costing a trifle, a hook, a pair of large, sharp shears, a tack hammer, a few tacks, a piece of burlap, a few yards of cloth, and—a little talent. Unlike baskets, lace and metal work, which are more or less luxuries, rugs are a necessity, and at present America depends upon the Orient and her own carpet mills for the supply. When I began my experiments, there were no hand-made rugs of American manufacture save those woven by a few Orientals in this country, and those woven by Indian tribes. None of the hooked kind were to be found in the market. Within the last two years, as the result of my efforts, many small enterprises similar to my own have sprung up in various parts of the country. These young indus-
tries encountered the same drawbacks as had the farmers’ wives: the difficulty of getting suitable material at reasonable prices, and reliable dyes; but having secured both material and dyes in large quantities for my own use, I was able to furnish these where they were desired, and thus the work is rapidly gaining ground.

Encouraging as is the progress of these industries, I think that its most hopeful phase is the work in manual training schools. A durable rug, beautiful in color and of good design, is an acquisition to any home, and the process of making such under proper instruction is so simple that a bright child of twelve or fourteen years can do as good work as a woman. Rug-making is certainly a more practical accomplishment for pupils to learn than embroidery, lace-making or basketry. The training given the individual through this craft is very general, as it begins with the hand, but later educates the eye in color and form; and what is of final importance for the majority of workers, the finished product has intrinsic merit and commands a ready market at good prices.

A word must be added in regard to designs. The market is already overcrowded with Oriental rugs of all grades and descriptions, and it is idle for any one to attempt to imitate them. Now, it is not an easy thing, when various nations have spent much of their talent for centuries on rugs, for a young craftsman to find fresh and untried motifs for his own designs. Yet by carefully avoiding all imitation and by using a few simple units in original ways, very striking results can be obtained. A study of savage ornament will reveal how much can be done if a simple and direct treatment is followed. Then, also, color is of great importance. It is better to begin with only two or three harmonious colors, and to study how these may be varied, contrasted, and superimposed upon one another. If savage elements constitute the design, rich, warm coloring should be used with a
bold simplicity, and all fine details should be avoided. With experience, various tones can be secured in dyeing a color, and when properly worked in masses, a beautiful play of color adds richness to the actual pattern. It may be asked where savage designs can be found. In books on ethnology, in old art magazines, in illustrated books on foreign travel, in collections in museums, not only savage ornament abounds, but also the primitive ornament of the Egyptians, Assyrians, Mexicans, and Peruvians.

Aside from the industries and the manual training schools, this work should appeal to many housewives who are skilful in hand work and love to beautify their homes. In the same length of time which is required to execute a bit of linen embroidery which loses much of its beauty the first time it is laundered, one can make a moderate sized rug which will last a generation, and on the comparative value and usefulness of the two it is not necessary to dwell. I believe the day is not far distant when rug-making will take a prominent place among American handicrafts, and in the hands of many ingenious workers, this work will doubtless become as varied, and I trust, as beautiful, as that of foreign countries.