

# Out From Underfoot: Nova Scotian Hooked Rugs

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## ABSTRACT

Laura McLauchlan and Joan Young examine rug-hooking as a culturally significant artistic expression of generations of women in Shelburne County.

## RÉSUMÉ

Laura McLauchlan et Joan Young montrent l'importance culturelle de la confection des tapis à points noués dans le comté de Shelburne, activité qui représente l'expression artistique de nombreuses générations de femmes de cette région.

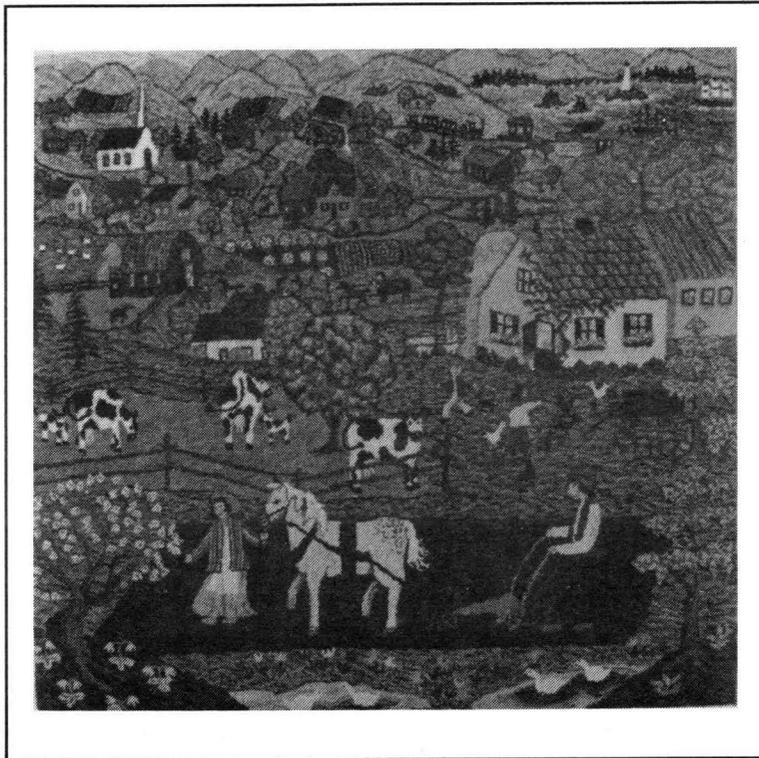
In the late twentieth century," writes social critic Susan Willis in *A Primer For Daily Life*, "our dilemma is how to reverse the blind rush of progress and turn ourselves around ... moving backwards into the future with eyes fixedly contemplating the past".<sup>1</sup> Rug-hooking is a process which accepts scarcity of materials and time and uses the stuff of the past for the future. Eighty-one year old Gladys Smith of Lockeport, Nova Scotia -- who learned how to hook rugs as a child -- recalled of her mother's generation, "they were always busy. They never lost a minute of time."<sup>2</sup> Scarcity was assumed as part of life in coastal communities: one used one's time to make do with limited resources.

Using the hooked rug as medium, rural Maritime women of previous and current generations have pulled together different skills, including spinning wool, finding and collecting scraps of material, tracing a design, combining different designs, and choosing colour arrangements. If the men of coastal communities have had a shared world based on fishing and hunting so, too, have the women shared domestic projects which include rug-hooking.

1995 has been proclaimed "The Year of the Hooked

Rug" in Nova Scotia, and throughout the province in such places as Yarmouth, Shelburne, Cheticamp, and Wolfville there have been displays of hand-hooked rugs. Maritime-made rugs and quilts are now beginning to be recognized as part of the record of a culturally-consequent tradition. Throughout the Maritime provinces, as elsewhere, both rug-hooking and quilting are predominantly practiced by women who are often not conversant with the "Great Masters" and the "Great Tradition" which a favoured few study in urban centres. Their work follows a very different trajectory: it is populist rather than elitist, rural rather than urban, and it has been practised, almost exclusively, by women. Because it does not belong to a Tradition of Past Masters, rug-hooking can be theorized as part of an alternate tradition of cultural expression.

In *American Hooked and Sewn Rugs: Folk Art Under Foot*, Joel and Kate Kopp note that the introduction of jute burlap -- made from gunny sacking and hessian cloth -- occurred around 1820 and "made the hooking technique popular and practical in North America." The Koppes note that one of the earliest dated hooked rugs "was made by Abigail Smith, New



Nostalgia, Joan Young, (?), Sable River. 73 x 77.5 cm.  
On display at Acadia University Art Gallery, Fall, 1995.  
Photo by Gary Boates.

Maryland, Nova Scotia and dated 1860”<sup>3</sup>. They link the first rugs to the coastal communities -- to fishermen and their wives -- and note a similarity between hooks used for net-mending and rug hooks. According to Dorothy Hupman, now in her eighties, men made rug hooks for their wives using a nail and then adding a hand-made handle.<sup>4</sup> The Kopps assert that the technique of rug-hooking was conceived and developed during the nineteenth century in either the Maritime provinces or Maine. Other sources suggest that the origins of rug-hooking belong with the Norse and preceded the creation of burlap.<sup>5</sup> Whether hooking rugs originated in the Maritimes or with the

Scandinavian people is open to debate. All that can be stated with certainty is that the hand-hooked rugs done on burlap have been made in the Maritimes from the mid-nineteenth century.

Attention to hooked rugs and quilts made by both literate and unlettered women provides us with a kind of schematic map on which to locate the home ground of women who have too often fallen through the cracks of cultural representation. In rugs, as in quilts, we have tangible artifacts which can be read as cultural texts. As Nicole Brossard writes, “Écrire c’est se faire voir ... S’imposer au regard de l’autre avant qu’il ne s’imposé.”<sup>6</sup> Where the diaries and letters of

Nova Scotia women use words,<sup>7</sup> the rugs communicate through colour, and, where diaries speak of events, the rugs speak in images, whether from patterns or in designs made at home.

Our eighty-five year old friend, and rug-hooker, Molly Wilson wrote Laura McLauchlan last year that if she had another life-time before her that she would, she supposed, vow "somehow not to be a non person."<sup>8</sup> For us the remark was a little puzzling for we have known her for years as the vital centre of female community and as a gardener second to none. But the fight "not to be a non person," -- to resist feeling like Beresford Howe's "Mrs. -- Um," "just an old woman, white hair and all that"<sup>9</sup> -- is a significant one in a culture in which most of the 'Somebodies' are male. Attention to women's cultural productions of all sorts, whether in books, paintings, quilts, or rugs, is surely part of what Brossard would agree to include with the phrase "se faire voir." In celebrating the rugs it is vital, also, to 'see' something of the lives of the women who make them.

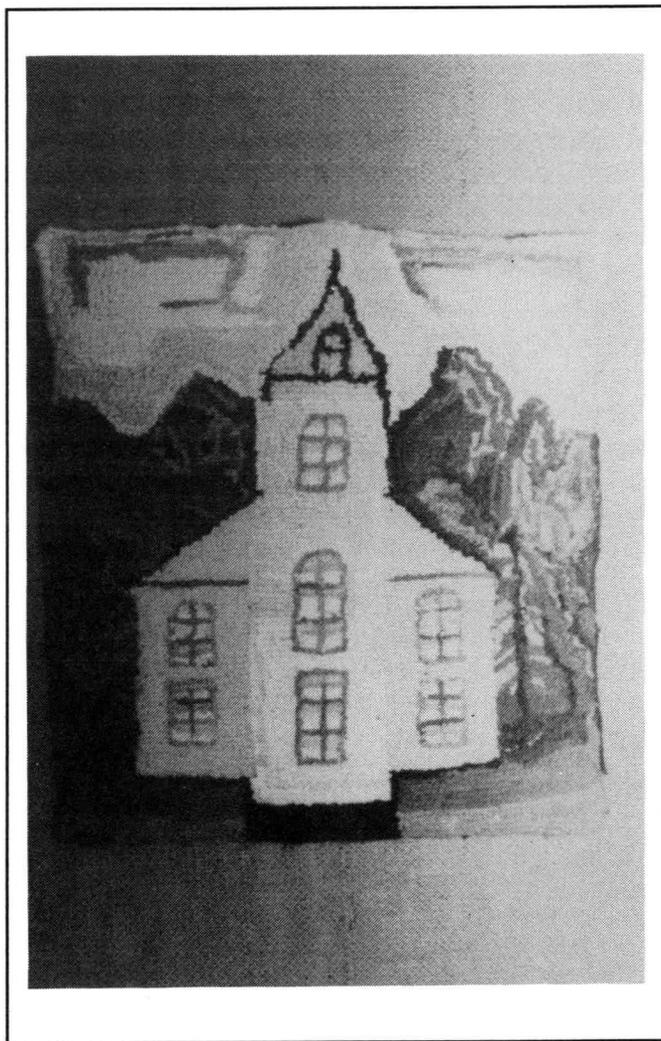
In "Reading the Rugs of Shelburne County" a presentation on Shelburne County Rugs made at the "Maritime Women: A Place of Her Own" Conference in 1992, we displayed the work of four women over eighty.<sup>10</sup> Since then, two of the rug-hookers whose work we discussed have put new work on display in the Shelburne County Museum. Dorothy Hupman's "First Ragged Island Baptist Church" (See Figure # 1) depicts the church she has attended since her marriage in the 1930s. Seen in colour, the autumnal yellow of the trees back of the church offsets the starkly outlined white church. The natural world is vibrantly present in the forest surrounding the church. The sky is the same white as the church with some wintry gray suggesting both its maker's 'autumnal' age at mid-eighty while symbolically representing harmony between church and sky, heaven and earth.

Molly Wilson's stair-tread (See Figure #2) shows an infant's hands on a blue background with humming-

birds, which frequent her garden, on either side. This piece may remind readers of the prevalence of floral motifs as well as, less common, designs of hands seen in traditional rugs. One sees the 'hand motif' around doorways in rural villages in India as a mark that good fortune has come to a home. Wilson's piece commemorates the third summer of an only child.

In addition to accomplished rug-hookers throughout the Maritimes whose work warrants, at least, another article, two contemporary Nova Scotian artists, best known as painters, have used the traditional craft of rug-hooking in their work. Curator Mora Dianne O'Neill notes that Nova Scotian artist "[Nancy] Edell was one of the first to recognize the tremendous reservoir contained in folk media for an artist struggling to re-establish a viable role for art ... incorporat(ing) a deliberately folk art medium into the realm of fine art."<sup>11</sup> Edell is well known for her mixed medium works which display hooked pieces along with paintings. Edell does the time-consuming hooking herself, since, as she has observed, the individual rug-hooker's technique is a central part of the overall work. Rose Adams' 1984 show, "Busy Bees," constituted a younger female artist's vivid responses to the rugs of her ancestors from East Ragged Island, Shelburne County. Her installation on Hooked Rugs appeared in galleries throughout Atlantic Canada and deals with the hooked rug making of her great grandmother Harriet Decker and her grandmother Lois Decker. In "Local Herstories," the Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery presentation of "Busy Bees," Heather Dawkins observes that "Adams constructs a herstory from ... fragments of industriousness, pleasure, domesticity, creativity and family history."<sup>12</sup> The record of women's lives in rural communities is so easily lost. Women who leave hooked rugs do leave behind them a trace of themselves.

Nevertheless, those who have attended auctions along the South Shore know that often buyers come from outside the Maritimes and take the rugs out of



**Figure 1.** First Ragged Island Baptist Church, Dorothy Hupman, 12" x 14", made in Allendale, Shelburne County circa 1994. On display at the Shelburne County Museum, Summer and Fall, 1995. Photo by Joan Young.

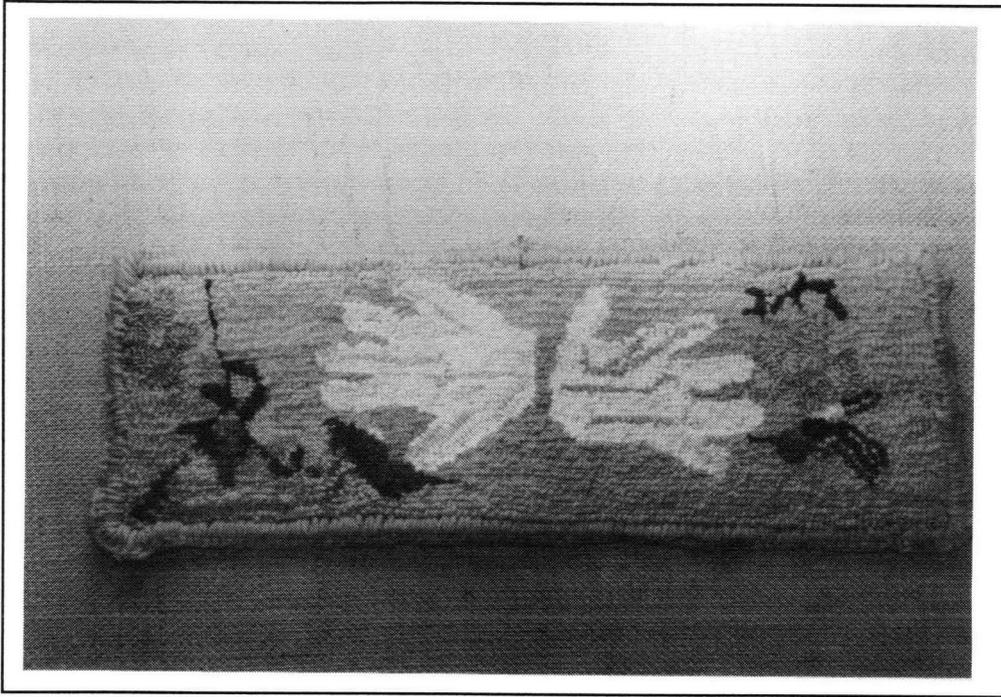


Figure 2. Hands With Two Hummingbirds: Stair Tread by Molly Wilson, Laura McLauchlan, (?). On display at the Shelburne County Museum, Summer and Fall, 1995. Photo by Joan Young.

the region. Once this commodification process occurs, the maker may seem irrelevant as inevitably occurs in more industrialized forms of rug production. Our desire has been to learn from the practice of the hooked rug: to use it as an occasion of 'retrieval' in which, as Willis put it, we can move "backwards into the future."<sup>13</sup> When completed, the rugs were traditionally put to immediate use. As Gladys Smith told us, looking back seventy years, "[t]hat's about all we had on the floor. We'd wash them and wear them

out." As the senior members of the community emphasize repeatedly, the tradition of rug-hooking comes out of a society where neither time nor worn out clothes could be wasted. Utility and aesthetics had to balance. Perhaps that sense of balance is what we most need to recover, even as we resist a view of culture as belonging only to members of privileged elites. The rugs are most often made by women well outside such elites and they challenge us to see, as an art form, a home-made tradition long underfoot.

## NOTES

1. Susan Willis, A Primer For Daily Life, (London: Routledge, 1991), 42.
2. Gladys Smith, "Oral History Interview with Laura McLauchlan & Joan Young," (Lockeport, Nova Scotia, August 10, 1992).
3. Joel & Kate Kopp, American Hooked and Sewn Rugs: Folk Art Underfoot, (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1975), 37,40.
4. Dorothy Hupman, Oral History Interview with Laura McLauchlan and Joan Young, (unpublished, July 10, 1992).
5. Debra Maltzman Grayson, Rugs & Wall Hangings, (London: Gordon & Gotch, 1985), 12.
6. Nicole Brossard, Double Impressions: Poèmes et textes 1967-1984, (Montréal: Editions de l'Hexagone, 1978), 55.
7. See No Place Like Home: Diaries and Letters of Nova Scotia Women: 1771-1938, ed. Margaret Conrad, Toni Laidlaw, Donna Smyth.
8. Molly Wilson, Unpublished letter to Laura McLauchlan, (Toronto: Spring, 1994).
9. Constance Beresford Howe, A Serious Widow, (Toronto: Macmillan, 1991), 82, 109.
10. "Reading the Rugs of Shelburne County: Art of Scraps," will be published in Spring of 1996 in University of Toronto Quarterly: Cultural Studies Issue, Vol. 2.
11. Mora Dianne O'Neill, "Nancy Edell, Art Nuns: Recent Works," (Halifax: Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, 1991), 4.
12. Heather Dawkins, "Grand History/Local Herstories: Work by Rose Adams & Heather Dawkins," Exhibition Catalogue, (Mt. St. Vincent University: July 1986), 2.
13. Willis, Primer, 42.