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Curator's Corner

December 2011

Braided Rag Rugs

Rags scraps were a common commodity which, sooner or later, everyone in America possessed. The thrifty recycling of odds and ends of worn-out garments appealed to the American character. Soon long strips of rag were braided to create a practical, durable floor covering that was reversible and washable. Rag rugs added warmth to a room by reducing drafts and covering cold floors. They were used by poorer families who could not afford imported woven carpets. Making rag rugs also kept children and women from having idle time on their hands.

It is uncertain whether braided rug making began in America, but braided corn-husk doormats and mats made of marsh grasses are described in colonial and late 18th Century sources. Braided mats were depicted in 19th Century paintings, engravings, and writings. Braided woolen rugs were exhibited at agricultural fairs at least as early as 1822 when they “were noticed and admired” in Plymouth, Massachusetts.

As the 19th Century progressed and successful carpet making brought factory-produced floor coverings within the economic reach of most Americans, handmade rug making became more of a deliberate expression of an aesthetic impulse. Leaders of the Aesthetic Movement in the late 19th Century were instrumental in popularizing this type of rug making. These rugs had no inherent pictorial interest, but depended on subtle texture and sophisticated color shading for their beauty.

With the revival of interest in Early American handicrafts shortly after the turn-of-the-Twentieth-Century, rug braiding gained renewed popularity. The simple technique and thrifty used of materials appealed to Arts-and-Crafts leagues, especially in New England, and the craft became part of the W.P.A. projects.

Rug braiding was even taught on television during the 1940s and 1950s.

The Farm Museum has several braided rag rugs on display in the exhibit rooms of the Farmhouse. Rug braiding is still practiced by a few artisans who pass the art from generation to generation. Be sure to take note of our collection the next time you take a Farmhouse tour.

August 2011

A Sample of Needlework

Most of us think of samplers as beautiful framed works of textile art made during Victorian times. Few realize that samplers have been made for centuries and it is rare for there to be any truly original elements.

It is often hard to separate real samplers from other examples of textiles. Early samplers were made as samples of stitches and stitch combinations, to be utilized by the maker or passed down from generation to generation, since books and paper illustrating needlework patterns did not become a reality for the masses until the late 1800s.

During the 1600s, samplers were long and narrow strips of linen, still used as records of patterns and designs passed down from generation to generation, with elements added and subtracted as far as the maker's imagination could take them. Although some believe that samplers were made to teach girls their letters, they were actually used to teach girls how to sew letters as part of the family's initials or monogram acting as identification of valuable textiles.

It is interesting to note here how valuable needles were during this time. By the 1600s, steel needles replaced iron ones, but steel needles and pins were expensive and rare because they were made by hand. Even punching the eye of the needle was done by hand. Fish bones and even thorns were often used by the poor to make such things as pillow or bone lace.

The use of samplers was changed and expanded over the centuries. Some samplers were used by 18th Century school teachers to teach poor children clothing construction and showed seam stitches.

The Puritans brought the art of sampler making to America, and influenced the creation of samplers with

biblical verses. It is hard for us to imagine a small child stitching the words to the Lord's Prayer onto a strip of linen.

During the 19th Century, samplers became more decorative and the elaborate stitches gave way to a predominance of cross stitch. The pieces became more square or rectangular in shape and lacked the originality and spontaneity of the earlier pieces. Samplers became wall decorations instead of stitch samples.

The first aniline dyes were invented in 1856, permitting the use of vibrant colors that were a joy to those who almost always wore black. These bright colors of wool Berlin yarns, made with new dyes in Germany, could not reproduce the subtlety and beauty of the earlier dyes. They also began to produce paper patterns which started to appear in ladies' magazines both in American and Europe.

By the late 1800s, embroidery had become a parlor pastime for most women, rather than a necessity for passing down patterns and for monogramming textiles. Machine made textiles soon replaced the need for handwork.

The Farm Museum is in the possession of two lovely samplers currently on exhibit in the collection. The first sampler is an Early American alphabet sampler dating back to 1816 and was made by Marie Ann Morris. The second sampler dates back to 1850 with the initials "AB" and "DB". These pieces are true works of craftsmanship, and we are fortunate to have them in our collection.

Come visit the Farm Museum to view these items and many other exhibits that provide a glimpse back into our past. To comment on this blog, please email ccfarm@ccg.carr.org

April 2011

The History of Irons

During the First Century B.C., the Chinese were the first to apply heat to the pressing process. They solved the problem by using long-handled pans filled with hot charcoal. Since that time, there has been a long succession of devices utilized for ironing, especially in Asia, but it was not until the 17th Century that heated irons were used in the West. The three main types of irons used well into the twentieth century were invented during this time: The charcoal iron, the box iron, and the sadiron.

During the 1800s in America, a wide variety of irons were invented. A box iron was heated by a piece of hot iron, known as a slug. Another slug was kept hot on the stove while the first was being used. The idea of a heated slug came from Talley or goffering irons used by the Italians to make the elaborate ruffles similar to those on the costumes worn by Queen Elizabeth I.

The sadiron, one of the most common 19th century irons, was a solid piece of metal heated on the stove. Its name "sadiron" came from an obsolete use of the word "sad" meaning "solid". It began as a piece of metal that was shaped and polished on the bottom. In 1870, Mary Potts of Ottuma, Iowa, invented an iron pointed at each end, making it easier to iron in both directions. It also contained a layer of non-conducting material between the soleplate and the top of the iron to retain heat in the pressing surface. She also patented a sadiron that had a useful detachable handle. The iron handles were too hot to handle and required the use of a pot holder. These irons are usually found with one wooden handle and three sets of bases, two of which were kept hot on the stove while the third was in use.

By 1890 gas irons were being used as well but nothing was truly satisfactory until the advent of electricity. The first electric iron was patented in 1882. But most electrical companies only provided electric at night (for lights) around the turn of the century. It was not until 1904 that Earl Richardson, a plant supervisor in Ontario, Canada, convinced the electric company there, to provide electric all day Tuesday so that the housewives could iron.

During the Months of April, May and June, The Museum is featuring a special display in the large hall exhibit case of several unique irons on loan from a private collection. Visit us online at www.carrollcountymuseum.org for hours and general information. To comment on this blog, please email ccfarm@ccg.carr.org

March 2011

"Bits and Pieces"

American quilting was a skill brought over from Europe by the earliest settlers. During the 17th and 18th century women would piece together small strips of fabric left over from clothing or other textiles into mosaic-like designs for bed coverings that were both functional and beautiful. Over time, patterns such as the Log Cabin, the Sun Bonnet Sue, and the Lone Star, were developed, named and passed on through

generations. These designs were inspired by a variety of sources such as local folklore, religious beliefs and the local environment. Today there are several thousand recognized quilt patterns. Album quilts, which depicted particular historical or biblical scenes, were quite popular. Also prevalent were special occasion quilts such as the Friendship quilt where each block would be done individually and then sewn together and offered as a gift from the community. Friendship quilts often depicted scenes of personal memory that the owner could treasure for years to come.

There are generally two types of techniques used in the patchwork of a quilt; piecing, which involves sewing strips of fabric together; and appliqué, when one fabric or pattern is sewn on top of a larger piece of fabric. However, many times both techniques can be found in a single quilt design.

This patchwork becomes the top layer of the quilt. Once completed it is stretched onto a frame over a layer of inner padding and an outer lining and then stitched together. The stitching of a quilt is often times as important as the patchwork designs. Most often, this quilting was done communally in quilting bees of up to twelve women. Arriving early in the morning and leaving late in the evening a group of women could expect to finish several quilts. These bees served a very important social function, especially in rural communities where there were few other opportunities to spend time with other women. It was here that knowledge of quilting techniques and the community was shared and passed on to the younger children. In addition to young girls, young boys were also taught to cut and sew patterns. In fact, two U.S. presidents, Calvin Coolidge and Dwight Eisenhower helped their mothers piece quilts.

Between 1875 and 1900, "Crazy quilts" became very popular as a distinctly American invention. Consisting of irregular pieces of silks, satins and velvets, and further decorated with embroidery, these crazy quilts were often used as elegant parlor robes in the Victorian century.

A quilt, like all art, is unique – a rich story sewn together from thousands of scraps of folklore and mythology. Within its many layers of meaning, and patient stitches which have withstood the test of time, a little mystery resides. The real essence of their beauty lies in their makers.

The Farm Museum has many hand-made quilts on display in the Quilting Room. It's worth a trip to see these unique and lovely works of art. Visit us online at www.carrollcountymuseum.org for hours and general information. To comment on this blog, please email ccfarm@ccg.carr.org