

The Crafts: Hand-Made Rugs and Fabrics

Making Turkish Carpets in Ireland. . . Mary Gorges. . . Chambers's Jour

This industry—the making of “Turkey” carpets in Donegal—originated in the observation made by certain manufacturers of artistic textiles, when on tour in Donegal, that here, in one of the wildest, grandest, but also most barren parts of Ireland, hand-labor was plentiful, and only applied to the well-nigh impossible task of winning a bare subsistence from land often little better than rock or bog, while the latent cleverness of the people, and the quickness of brain and deftness of touch which they undoubtedly possess, were absolutely wasted. In such qualities these gentlemen recognized a vein of wealth, so exactly did they seem to meet the requirements, of an undertaking in contemplation at the time, the success of which must depend, not alone on sufficiency of hand-labor, but on just such natural intelligence to supplement it. Thus inspired, they resolved on the experiment of establishing a place at Killybegs for the making of hand-tufted carpets of the description known as Turkish or Persian. This done, they gathered in the young people of the district and set them to work.

The peculiarity of the hand-tufted carpet is that from its nature it must be a hand production. The tufts, or “mosaics of small woolen squares,” as William Morris calls them, are tied by the fingers in knots into longitudinal warps, which are stretched between two long parallel beams. The carpets are made of any size or shape. The design is placed in front, and the girls—from three to a dozen, according to the size of the carpet—select the colors indicated, row by row; these are tied, then bound down by “shoots” of woolen weft drawn across the entire width, and beaten firm by small iron-toothed hammers. Individual skill and workmanship come largely into play; and it is an industry peculiarly suited to the rural districts of Ireland, for no steam-power is required, and there is, therefore, no handicap on the commercial side from the absence of coal; while, the production being necessarily slow, a large proportion of the ultimate value comes from the labor. The fact of these carpets being hand-tufted gives its charm in that stamp of individuality and irregularity which no power-loom can give. With the increase of good taste and wealth the demand for the hand-made daily grows. The method requires human thought in the process; it is, therefore, an industry which cannot be superseded by power-loom, and can only be approached by mechanism of a highly complicated

and uneconomical sort. Indeed, it is this individual art character which has kept the Persian and Turkey carpets in steady demand for hundreds of years, and the appreciation of it which led William Morris to establish hand-tuft carpet and tapestry looms at Hammersmith twenty to thirty years ago. These Donegal carpets are of similar weave and character.

Visitors to the textile department at the Dublin Horse Show in August of last year were much surprised and pleased by the beautiful display of Donegal “Turkey” carpets to be seen in the three rich subdued colors of those Eastern fabrics, so exactly reproduced as to present absolutely no difference externally; we were assured that the colors were as unfading, the texture as impervious to wear, as in the original Eastern carpets, and, indeed, this was the impression conveyed by their rich, soft quality.

There were also very handsome carpets in green shades; one of myrtle color, another of delicate sea-green in which the pattern was defined by a little wave of lighter tint that undulated through the thick, soft pile. The picture which hung near, of a barefooted Donegal girl, agile and graceful as a mountain deer, drew attention to the fact that such girls were the principal weavers of these carpets.

From the method of the manufacture, it follows that these cannot be cheap carpets in the ordinary sense of the word. The price per square yard varies from seventeen to forty-five shillings. They can be made of any coloring or to any shape, while the success and beauty of the work depend very much on the worker. It is encouraging to those who believe in a future for Irish industries to hear that “the first year has proved that Irish girls are admirably adapted for the work,” as “they show a nimbleness of finger and sharpness of eye for color and form that have astonished their teachers; and they take up the work with a spirit and cheerfulness that is quite refreshing.”

Had Irish women failed in this first year's test of their industry and skill, the scheme to spread this work over the west of Ireland would probably never have been contemplated; but already the originators have little doubt “that the Irish hand-made fabrics will soon bulk largely in the markets of the world,” or that the further development of their undertaking will be as successful as its beginnings. It will give employment to many hundreds of girls and boys; and one of its most important features will be the rearing of

sufficient sheep on these Western Highlands to supply the full requirements of an industry whose goods are made entirely of wool. This wool will be spun and dyed on the spot, for in both of these arts Irish women are adepts; and the "soft, unfading colors produced by the people from common plants and mosses" are in great demand for friezes, homespuns, tweeds, and all woolen goods.

There is nothing utopian about this scheme; and perhaps the fact that a Scotch firm—Messrs. Morton of Darvel, Ayrshire—carry on this industry is a sufficient guarantee that the project is both feasible and eminently practicable. Confining their efforts entirely to Donegal at first, the promoters are building a place at Killybegs to accommodate over four hundred workers, this number being available within a radius of two miles from the village. Having an ideal harbor, as well as a branch of the Donegal Railway, Killybegs is meant to be the central depot, where all wool will be collected, and spinning and dyeing done for the entire industry. Other branches, for weaving only, will be established at villages such as Kilcar, Ardara, Glenties, etc., and the products forwarded to the central depot for finishing and despatch. For more scattered and outlying parts, where girls could not walk morning and evening to a factory, a simple device has been invented whereby after the girls have acquired the art they can take the frame-loom to their homes and weave the quaintly-designed rugs or tapestry-panels in their homes, or as they watch the sheep on the hillsides.

The Donegal carpets do not require the appeal to "support home industries." Once seen, they will be bought for the sound quality of the texture, the touch of art in design and coloring, and for their beauty; in short, for their intrinsic merit. Carpets have already been made at Killybegs for some of the highest decorative art critics in England and America; and work is at present going on for important public buildings.

World-wide attention has been called to this industry from the fact of Her late Majesty the Queen having ordered a Donegal carpet, to be made at Killybegs. The design chosen is in shaded red, of a very fine quality and on handsome rose-colored ground. The variety of beautiful designs and colorings were particularly remarked on by Sir Fleetwood Edwardes when conveying the order.

Hand-Made Filipino Fabrics.....Corr. Boston Transcript

The hand-loom of the Philippines manufacture some of the finest fabrics of the world. I recently visited the Filipino factories and home weaving shops, and saw some of the most ex-

quisite cloths ever produced on hand or power loom. The fibres utilized in the making of yarns and fabrics in the Philippines are quite numerous, the natives using cotton, wool, hemp, silk, pineapple fibre, cocoanut fibre, split bamboo stock, etc. The reason that such a wide variety of fibres can be utilized with profit in the Philippines is that the corresponding cost of the labor is extremely small. If the labor rates were the same here as in America it would not pay to handle two or three descriptions of fibres, as the expense of working the fibre into threads and ultimately into woven or knitted fabrics would be too much.

The fabrics manufactured from the pineapple fibre are probably worthy of classing with the highest grades of cloths in the market. These fabrics are delicately soft, fine in texture, possess a high gloss, hold their color well, and are worn by the richest classes in the islands. The pineapple-fibre cloth is known as "jusi" and is very popular among the foreigners in the islands, who purchase large quantities and send it home.

One would be surprised if he were aware of the immense amount of cocoanut fibre that is yearly consumed in the Philippines for the manufacture of cloths for wearing purposes, nets, ropes, twines, etc. The stuff is very inexpensive, and manufacturers of cocoanut materials are able to stock up a warehouse for the season for a few hundred dollars, whereas the same capacity if filled with cotton would cost thousands.

One of the principal fibre industries of the islands is that of hemp. The hemp business gives more employment to a larger variety of people than all of the other textile industries combined. It has been carried on since the beginning of the habitation of the islands. The hemp lands are found everywhere, and in nearly all cases the plantations are operated on a paying basis.

The Rag-Carpet Glorified.....New York Herald

Mrs. Douglas Volk, of New York, has long been interested in the arts and crafts movement, the aim of which is to revive and encourage the old hand industries, fast dying out in these days of machinery. Down in Centre Lovell, Me., Mrs. Volk's summer home, the natives are adepts at making the old rag rugs, or "mats," as they call them. These are of old rags, sewed together in long strips, sometimes braided and sometimes drawn through a foundation of burlap with an iron hook. "People who make rugs so well might make them better," thought the city woman, "and with pecuniary benefit to themselves." Mrs. Volk studied the matter from the economic side and concluded that here was an opportunity to make an experiment in home industry. Women and

girls could be given occupation in their homes, taught creative work, and so have a chance for more intelligent development than is to be expected from the factory life which many village girls seek in nearby towns. Mrs. Volk at once investigated the possibilities of artistic and durable hand-made rugs. She learned that the foundation of a rug is the web, which is very commonly of burlap, but decided that the rug she meant to develop should be worsted, on a web woven by hand, thus giving the people whom she desired to help further occupation.

In Centre Lovell weaving is not a lost art, neither is spinning, for, as every one knows, the weaver spins before she weaves. Several of the old inhabitants of the village have never abandoned their looms and still weave all the cloth they wear—literally “homespun” of the good old quality. From these old people Mrs. Volk took lessons in spinning and weaving, that she might thoroughly understand every detail of her rug from start to finish. A spinning wheel she possessed, but a loom she did not, and great was her delight when one of the natives dug out from his woodshed and presented to her a fine old loom of beautiful red oak, all made by hand, put together with pegs. There was not a suspicion of a nail in it, and it was over a hundred years old. This treasure was set up in the Volk dining-room, where recently another loom has been placed, crowding out the dining table and so transforming the room into a weaving establishment.

Mrs. Volk buys wool in the fleece from the farmers about her and sends it to an old carding mill to be carded into rolls, ready for the spinning wheel. The rug maker's part of the work then begins. Mrs. Volk does her spinning in her garden, where she has also three detached parts of her loom, the swift, creel, and warping bar. They serve to turn the spun warp into chain coils ready for the loom. To the uninitiated, the process of weaving the web seems complex, but interesting. The warp goes from the spinning wheel to the swift; there it is reeled and the length of the warp gauged. Then back again it goes to the spinning wheel to be wound on a series of bobbins for the creel. When the bobbins are filled and placed back in the creel, the warp winds from them up onto the warping bar, six feet long, where it zigzags across from peg to peg placed down the two side bars. The most intricate part of this process is what is known in weaving parlance as “taking a lease.” The operator takes a thread from each spool or bobbin on the creel, and by dexterous manipulation of them as they pass through her fingers prevents the warp from twisting as it reels off back of her onto the warping

bar. This ends the outdoor work, and the warp, now in long chain coils, is ready for the loom. There it has to be most carefully adjusted. The coils are tightly stretched from warp beam to cloth bar, these being the two extremities of the loom. Two sets of strands are passed through a harness and stay, and so fastened that they form two tiers of warp. It would seem now as if the operator might sit down and weave. But still another preparatory feature awaits her. This is winding quills for her weaving shuttle. A “taking time by the forelock” sort of weaver will keep dozens of quills on hand ready for use. Otherwise she will need some one sitting by to quill while she weaves, so rapidly does the loom consume the thread. The quills are simple little things, two inches long and about the size of a pencil. They are made of alder twigs, with the pith taken out, and wormed with thread, as full as they can hold, on the spinning wheel. With a quill in the shuttle, which she must watch and guide as it passes through coils of warp to prevent its falling on the floor at a critical moment, and her feet on the two treadles fastened to the harness of the loom, the operator at last sits down to weave the web, which she works upon at intervals until it is finished. After that the rest is fairly plain sailing. The web goes into a rug frame large enough to show the whole pattern as it is worked. Mrs. Volk originated her design and drew it on the web. She then selected her wools and worked them in by hooking two or three strands at a time up through the mesh. She has recently invented a clever knot which securely ties each strand after it is pulled through and puts the New England rug on a par with the Oriental for durability. The ends pulled through the web are the “pile,” which is sheared from time to time as the rug is filled in. It takes about six weeks to make, from start to finish, a three by five foot rug.

A picturesque and interesting feature of the work is the dyeing, which is a department in itself. To dye and make the dyes is no small matter. Here another lost art is being revived. Time was when every farmhouse had its dye vat and every housewife her pet recipe for making dyes. Aniline dyes have practically killed the home product, but some of the New England women are faithful to old traditions, particularly to home-made indigo blue, which is the fastest color in the world. The dye vat of one of the oldest inhabitants of Centre Lovell has been in constant operation for over half a century, and on this neighbor Mrs. Volk relies for her blue wools. Other colors she is learning to make herself and is teaching the art to her pupils. She gives “Barking Bees,” when

they all go out a-picnicking to gather bark and other vegetable matter for dyes. From the bark of different trees they get excellent browns and tans, from acorns a good gray, and from sumac beautiful yellows. These "Barking Bees" are popular social events in Centre Lovell. No less fascinating, but limited to her pupils, for it is an important business, are the "Dyeing Bees" on the border of the lake near the Volk homestead. Here teacher and pupils build bonfires, over which they put huge brass kettles containing the dye. While it is heating they wash the wool, then throw it into the kettles, and later spread it out on the rocks to sun and dry. The Centre Lovell rug makers advanced so fast that it was possible to exhibit some of their work in New York, where it at once attracted attention, with the result that most encouraging orders have been placed.

The Cloth of Cotters and Crofter. . . The Duchess. . . Youths' Companion

Men's eyes see again, men's minds live again,
men's hands fashion again.

Already the revival of handicrafts which flourished in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is taking root throughout Great Britain. At the annual Exhibition of the Home Arts and Industries in the Albert Hall in London are to be found exquisite bookbinding from Chiswick, specimens of the Della Robbia pottery from Birkenhead, fine hand-woven linen from the Ruskin Industry at Keswick, and so many other presentments indicative of this growing artistic feeling that it would be impossible to enumerate them here.

In these efforts there is no headstrong ambition, for, to use the wise sentences of Mr. J. A. Hobson, the economist: "It is, in a word, a practical informal attempt of a civilized society to mark out for itself the reasonable limits of machine production, and to insist that 'cheapness' shall not dominate the whole industrial world to the detriment of the pleasure and benefit arising from good work to the worker and consumer. Such a movement neither hopes nor seeks to restore mediævalism in industry, nor does it profess hostility to machinery; but it insists that machines shall be confined to the heavy, dull, monotonous, and therefore inhuman processes of work, while for the skill of human hand and eye shall be preserved all work which is pleasant and educative in its doing, and the skill and character of which contribute pleasure and profit to its use."

Yet, in connection with all this, by sheer force of circumstances, the home industries of Harris and Lewis, of Shetland, of Sutherland and other parts of the Highlands stand somewhat aloof; in a sense, through their tremendous importance,

they represent not a mere question of art and sentiment, but a serious problem.

The people of the Highlands and islands have little land to cultivate. Their homes, most of them still built after a primitive fashion, with thick stone walls, thatched roof, no chimney, tiny loopholes for windows, cling to the rocky sides of hills. Enter any of these cabins, and through the wreaths of blue curling peat smoke you may see an old woman seated spinning by the fire, and beyond, in the corner, the family loom, where the women of the house spend so many laborious hours in their struggle for daily bread, while the men "follow the sea," a precarious way of life. The work done by these crofters and cotters is beautiful and useful. That is unquestionable. The industry has existed since time immemorial, from Ossianic days, when one

came slowly from the setting sun
To Emer of Borda, in her clay-pile dun,
And found her dyeing cloth with subtle care.

But more than this, the success or failure of the industry at the present time means life or death to a people; that overmastering power—machinery—has taken it by the throat and written extinction in grim letters on its brow.

The Scottish Home Industries Association has been formed to combat this power; to insure, with all the force of practical knowledge and sympathy, a legitimate trade for these people; to fight their battle against the ills of competition and "truck"—in fact, to keep open, for this generation at least, a wide channel for the distribution of the beautiful homespun cloth.

I would describe as shortly as possible for those who have not learned Highland folk-lore and Highland customs at their grandame's knee, the processes of hand-spinning and hand-weaving.

After the wool packets are opened out and roughly sorted or stapled according to quality and length of fibre, of which there is considerable variety in the same fleece, the wool is cleansed from the grease derived from contact with the sheep (and the various protective "dipping" or "bathing" processes to which that animal is in autumn subjected). This is done by steeping in a hot liquid.

Dried and shaken up and still further "sorted," the wool is then passed through the process of carding or combing, which lays its fibres in the same direction. This is effected by means of a pair of implements like hair-brushes, with the handles at the sides and set with metal teeth.

The wool is now nearly ready to be spun into thread. The distaff and spindle were, from very early times, used for this purpose. The former

is a staff about four feet long, fixed in the spinner's waist belt on the left side, or more commonly in her upturned outer skirt, which thus forms a pocket in front for carrying the clews or balls of thread. To the projecting head of the distaff the wool, previously cross-carded into inch-thick loose cylinders—in which the fibre has now assumed a sort of spiral arrangement—is tied in an open bunch or bundle. From this it is fed out by the left hand of the spinner to the spindle, which is held at starting in the right hand, and afterward swings from it. The spindle is a rounded piece of wood, about a foot long and half an inch in diameter, loaded at the lower end by the whorle, which acts as "fly-wheel," and is generally made of stone, often a disk of steatite, about the diameter of a bronze penny, and weighing over an ounce and a half.

Some wool, drawn out from the store on the distaff, to which it still remains attached, is twisted into a kind of thread and tied to the middle of the spindle, from which it passes upward and is fastened by a simple hitch to a notch near the spindle-head. This is then twirled by the right hand, and as it spins, dropping slowly toward the ground, it twists all the wool up to the distaff. The spinner's hands regulate the speed and further supply, and thus determine the thickness of the thread. From time to time the thread is coiled round the shaft of the spindle into a ball, and a new hitch made, till the clew is large enough to be slipped off and a new one begun.

From the number of whorles found in prehistoric remains in Scotland, their use must be very ancient, yet the spindle is still to be seen at work on the hillsides, employed for its original purpose of spinning. It is also used occasionally for twining together different colors of thread, when the spinning is done by the well-known spinning-wheel. There are niceties about the use of this little machine, such as the adjustment of "tension" and so forth, which make some of the older workers as unwilling to let their unskilled daughters practise on it as a musical virtuoso would be to entrust his "Cremona" to a "scraper."

The next process is dyeing, and whether this is done "in the wool" or "in the thread," there is a final treatment in an ammoniacal liquid, called by the Highlanders "fual," which removes the last traces of oleaginous matter, and prepares the wool for receiving and retaining the dyes. The securing of uniformity of tint or shade has hitherto presented some difficulty, and this is partly due to the imperfection of the apparatus in common use, and to the usual habit of measuring the dyeing material merely by the handful.

The ordinary dye-pot holds but a few hanks, and when the next batch of wool or thread is passed through a new decoction, and the tint tested by merely raising the steaming mass for a moment on the end of a stick, the effect in the web is often disappointing.

Technical instruction, however, has done much, and will do more, to improve this. Among the most useful plants and herbs for producing colors are alder-tree bark and dock-root for black, bilberry and elder for blue, rock-lichen and rue-root for red, broom, furze bark and heather for green, and St. John's wort, sundew and bog-myrtle for yellow.

The dyed thread, washed in salt water if blue, or in fresh if of any other color, is next woven into a web at the cottage hand-loom. Then comes the process of "felting" or thickening, called "wauking" in the North, probably from its being chiefly effected by the feet. The microscopic projections on the fibre interlock when the web is beaten wet, and as the "wauk-mill" is apt to overdo the work, turning out a texture hard, stiff and heavy, the old process is still preserved in the Highlands of Scotland, and secures a fabric soft, supple, and sufficiently dense to be wind and weather proof.

The following description is taken from a paper read before the Gaelic Society in 1885: "In the Highland districts women make use of their feet to produce the same result (felting), and a picturesque sight it is to see a dozen or more Highland lassies sit in two rows facing each other. The web of cloth is passed round in a damp state, each one pressing it and pitching it with a dash to her next neighbor, and so the cloth is handled, pushed, crushed and welded so as to become close and even in texture. The process is slow and tedious, but the women know how to beguile the time, and the song is passed round, each one taking up the verse in turn, and all joining in the chorus. The effect is very peculiar, and often very pleasing, and the wauking songs are very popular in all the collections."

The commercial and practical side of the question is of course the important side, and that is still unsettled. For some time it will undoubtedly be an up-hill struggle to find an adequate market for the cloth, but the enthusiasm which people who really appreciate artistic handiwork, combined with the best wearing qualities, encourages those who are promoting the enterprise to believe that, in time, financial success will come also. Visiting Americans have manifested great interest in the enterprise, and one of the encouraging facts is the considerable orders which have already come from America.