

THE RYA OF FINLAND

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THE handiwork of the peoples of northern Europe, more especially that of the Scandinavians, is fairly well known throughout the world. However, the manual skill of the Finns, another interesting group of northerners, is not so familiar. In the Rya, a beautifully hand-knotted rug, the Finns have made a distinct contribution to the field of decorative arts.

The Rya is the work of the peasant folk. The almost continuous darkness of the long winter period offers much leisure for the development of the handicrafts. So the farmer accomplishes much both in the production of practical things for use in the out-door labor of summer, and the artistic for the indoors the year round. Among the peasant's latter achievements, the Rya represents perhaps the climax of his success. It is not unlike the oriental rug in its general appearance, but differs in the details of construction and in the purpose to which it is put.

The designs of the earlier Ryas are for the most part geometric—Fig. 1; the later rugs show the symbolic—Fig. 2. The symbols are confined generally to the center field, the border displaying the geometric forms. Some foreign motifs, such as the tulip, palmetto leaf and animal forms, particularly lions and birds, appeared at the beginning of the 18th century. By the end of the century the foreign influence in general had become so marked as to give rise to a controversy relative to the origin of the Rya. Although the question is still unsettled, evidence continues to accumulate in favor of the Finns.

The Rya differs from the oriental rug in the density of weave. The knots are greater distances apart. In fact in some of the oldest pieces

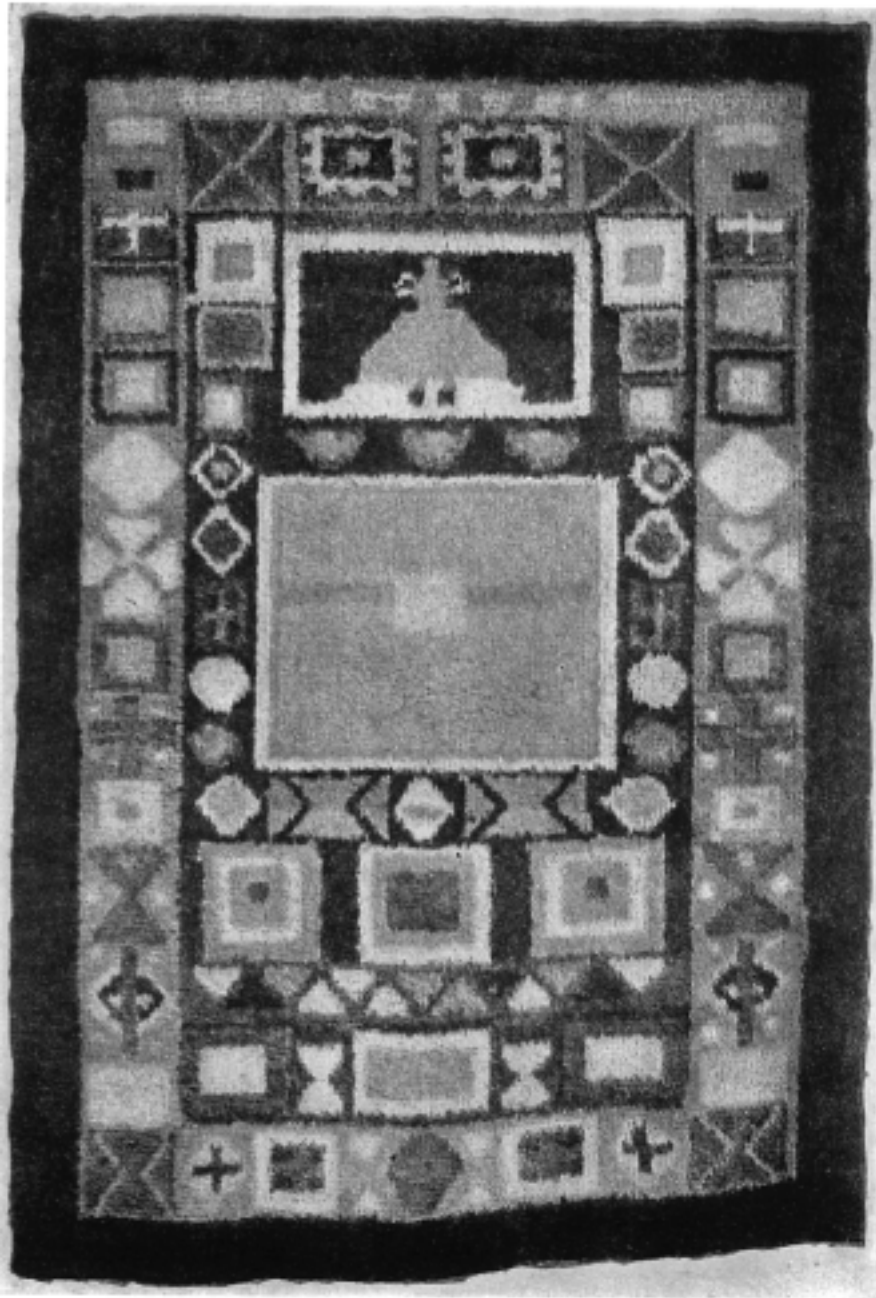


FIGURE I

A FINNISH RYA OF THE EARLY TYPE IN WHICH THE PURELY
GEOMETRIC MOTIF PREVAILS
(REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION OF GALERIE HÖRHAMMER HELSINGFORS)



FIGURE 2

A FINNISH RYA DATED 1804, AND ILLUSTRATING THE SYMBOLIC CENTER FIELD WITH THE "ZIGZAG" BORDER. NOTE ALSO THE HUMAN FORM AND ANIMAL FORMS WHICH ARE GIVEN PROMINENCE

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considerable areas appear without knots; they were not ordinarily used as floor coverings and consequently density of weave was not an important requisite. They were utilized as wall tapestries or more frequently as counterpanes. As the weaver's skill developed and the rugs attained the plane of a highly appreciated art, they were coveted as bridal gifts. In the early 18th century the marriage contract frequently provided specifically for a Rya or two; and in the inventories of the peasant's belongings the number served as an index to his wealth.

Attempts have been made to classify Ryas, but without much success. They are strikingly individualistic. "Styles" apparently never exerted an influence. Every peasant wove his Rya to satisfy his own desires and tastes. Even professional weavers who wandered from village to village taking orders for Ryas, wove them according to specifications set by the purchaser, rarely introducing their own ideas. In a few parishes there appears a similarity in the border design, but never in the center field motif. The colors are individualistic too, being influenced only by the natural environment. One can notice, for example, the preponderance of warm combinations of the reds and yellows in the weaves of the southwest coastal regions, and the colder blues and yellows in those from the interior.

Characteristic of most of the better Ryas are the dates and the harmony in color composition. Fig. 2 illustrates one with date and name of the original owner; the name does not appear as commonly as the date. The oldest dated rug now in existence is 1705. This, however, is not the oldest piece known. It is probable that Ryas were made several hundreds of years prior to the 18th century; they are still woven in the Finnish homes but do not possess the same beauty of color as those of centuries ago. The early art of dye making has been lost in Finland just as in other countries of Europe, and with it have gone the rich tones which are cherished so highly in the older specimens.

If one were to ask: what single factor in the Rya gives it its greatest value the answer would be color. The harmony in most cases is exquisite. The colors are pure, soft and fresh, recalling the warm, bright tones of the autumn landscape.

In view of the comparatively isolated location of the people of Finland, the ruggedness of their country, the severity of their climate and the consequent hard struggle for existence, the esthetic attainment of the

early inhabitants as exemplified by the Rya is deserving of the world's admiration. Their delightful appreciation of color and design and their adeptness in the art of weaving seem to point to a relatively advanced culture, which unfortunately is not everywhere apparent among the heritages of the modern folk.