THE RYIJY-RUG – A TRADITIONAL TEXTILE WITH NEW EXPRESSION

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Abstract

The ryijy-rug has remote reflections of the oriental carpet. It is a similar kind of woven, piled textile, but the weaving technique is different. As a rule, the wooden pile knots are tied around the weft and end in a row with the front. The knot count is lower than in oriental carpets – usually 40 to 80 knots per square inch (6 to 12 knots per square centimetre). The number of knots in one square inch – or 300 knots per square inch (45 knots per square centimetre) – is exceptionally high.

The long history of weaving ryijy rugs can be traced to the 14th century and even earlier. The use of wool was already cultivated then in Scandinavia. In the beginning the ryijy was used as a blanket for beds or as a sleeping rug especially in boats. In the 16th century the ryijy had become a common house hold textile and decoration. It was as necessary in the farm house as the ryijy pot – on its upper side – which was at the same time a valuable and warm woven textile. Nude motifs, human figures, pattern books, folk weavers' coincidental work on patterns taken from the upper class ryijys by combining motifs peculiar to various styles with traditional geometric patterns.

In the latter part of the 19th century handicrafts were challenged due to the boom of industrial mass production. The Friends of Finnish Handicrafts was founded in 1879 to encourage the new – and to restore forgotten traditions. The aim was to encourage the creation of the new national style stemming from the past.

At the turn of 1900 rediscovered the folk tradition. For the Paris World Exhibition in 1900 ryijy-rugs were the only textiles by artists. Finnish ryijy-making had experienced a vogue in around the 1920's. They were produced by textile artists. The Friends of Handicrafts has cooperated with artists, trade handicraft associations conducted for home consumption. With ryijy rug modern art has entered homes. Ryijy has proved to be a remarkable ability to absorb the trends and stylistic expressions of its time.

Finnish art is literally situated between East and West, as the theme of the well-known

lyrics with the flow of influences continuing these into culturally determined traditions. In fact art is specific fact in reflected in mainly warm and has its installation within the environment, artists deal with. One example is the ryijy-rug of the present.

The ryijy-rug has remote reflections of the oriental carpet. It is a similar kind of woven, piled textile, but

the weaving tehnique differs from that of oriental carpets. The ground weave of decorated ryijy is usually linen tabby or weft rib. The warp of the oldest ryas of wool or hemp; while later it was linen thread or tow. The weft is mostly of wool. As a rule, the woolen pile is tied around the warp ends in rows with the knot. This knot used, is that of the most used in oriental carpets – smyrna or ghiordes. The pile is thick wool, so the number of knots is not dense – 60-300 / dm2, and the length 15-35 cm. The rug mostly measures 240x180 cm. The oldest ryijys were woven in two pieces – with a difficulty to get the decorative patterns to fit together. When broader looms became common, decorative ryas were woven in single pieces.

Ryijy is a familiar textile to every Finn. Its use has changed over the years – from covering material to an important art textile. At different periods, ryijy has exhibited a quite remarkable ability to absorb the trends and stylistic aspirations of its time.

The tradizon of weaving ryijy rugs dates back to the 14th century and even earlier to the early middle- ages according to archaeological findings. This craft was an early cultural loan from Scandinavia – from the west. In the beginning the ryijy was used as substitue for hides as a sleeping rug, especially in boats. Only with a few decorations – mostly without. Later the ryijy became in use as coverlets in the castles, crown manors, parsonages and homes of burghers. From the crown manors established in Finland in the 16th century the craft of rya weavings spread to the countryside. The majority of the castle ryijys had natural black, grey or white color of sheep wool. These simple rugs were decorated sometimes with coloured stripes in the ground weave and the piled reverse with variegated borders and geometrical pattern at the head end. The decorative elements appear first to the castle ryijys, but more decoration was adopted from 17th and 18th onwards. The decorative interior textile was born.

By this time in the 17th century, the ryijy had become a common house-hold textile and accessory throughout the country. Used first as a bedcover in the burgher homes, the ryijy got – on its upper side – imitations of the fashionable patterns, woven Turkey work, furniture textiles, pattern books – dating back even to the 16th century. One popular motif was the tulip adapted from the patterns inpried by flowers imported from Turkey. Folk weavers continued to work on patterns taken from the upper class ryas by combining motifs peculiar to various styles with traditional geometric patterns squares and stripes. Figures unfamiliar to the weaver have been transformed into patches of bright colour, flowers into red squares, crosses or circles, and figure motifs into triangles. Different local and provincial types are to be distinguished among the folk rugs with deformed and misinterpreted stylistic features that led to most amazing compositions. But, because of its warming quality, the woolly untied reverse pile of bed ryas was still preserved for some time to come. In the latter part of the 18th century, this type of ryijy with a decorative pile only on the face, became almost exclusive.

Festive bridal ryas, often passed on from mother to daughter, were woven in the countryside up to the mid 19th century. Mid 19th century the rug weaving showed signs of decline and the way of using ryijys changed. The pile followed "rose designs" borrowed fro pattern books. The rug was spread on the floor as a carpet or on the wall. The ryijy was discarded as a sleeping rug in the latter part of the 19th century.

In the latter part of he 19th century handicrafts were outmoded and undervalued due to the boom in industrial mas production. This led to degeneration in artistic taste. The Finnish Society for Crafts and Design was founded in 1875 with the specific function to promote crafts and design. The Friends of the Finnish Handicrafts was founded in 1879 for paromoting textile art – and to collect folk textiles still existing. The aim was to encourage the creation of the new national style stemming from the tradition.

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Artists around 1900, inspired by the National Romantic Movement, rediscovered the ryijy again. For the Paris World Fair 1900 some textiles – ryijys were designed by artists, and these have been regarded as first art textiles. During this period ryijy became the decorative furnishing textile which it is today. The interest shown artists in designing new ryijy models by this time brought about a new period of vigour in the ryijy weaving art, which until then had been on the verge of disappearing from Finland. Finnish ryijy-making craft experienced a vigorous revival in the 1920ies. Exhibitions as well as publication on ryijys aroused interest in traditional ryijy craft which was a suitable example of an old original culture for a country that had only recently, in 1917, become independent. The Friends of Finnish Handicrafts arranged ryijy art competitons for obtaining ryijys with thin pile. Unlike the old all-purpose ryijys with thick pile, ryijys had become had become art objects for wall decoration. They now were planned by textile artists who mastered the weaving technique. The Friends of Handicrafts has cooperated with artists, made handicraft packages produced for home completion – which has played its part in advancing the development of ryijy as a nationally distinctive art textile.

Finnish ryijy wall rugs continued to be popular in the 1930's. An increasing number of young artists were adopting the ryijy rug technique. In spite of the traditional techniques , the contemporary trends in art and design influenced the artists' creations. The Bauhaus spirit changed to motifs from nature and coloring to picturesque tones in the end of the 1940's. Ryijy rug models designed by artists for sales purposes brought the fruits of modern art into nearly every Finnish home, the models were replicated in rugs for everything from rocking chair covers to sofa cushions.

From the Design Triennales of Milano in the 1950's onwards Finland achieved an international reputation even with modern artistic ryijy tapestries. This is distinguished by long, thick pile brushed upright; free pictoral compositions of innumerable shades of color, and interpretation either from nature, contemporary artistic trends or the ryijy tradition.

The ryijy technique offers opportunities for emphasising the characteristic qualities of sculpture and painting, from a poetic picturesque to strongly three-dimensional structural expression. Modern materials, new colorings, the changing use of the ryijy technique in surface disposition continually imbue ryijy with new dimensions. The fundamental points of departure are still the nature of Finland, subjective experience, and the ancient weaving tradition. The ryijy still holds a central position in Finnish textile art. One might even speak of its increasing significance – especially as the artistic highlight of public areas.

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