

The National Rug Event: A Community Project

Out of an idea which it is rumoured came from potter Marea Gazzard, grew a community project sponsored by the Crafts Board of Australia Council, which has become known throughout Australia as the National Rug Event.

The project was aimed at involving a wide cross-section of the Australian community in the craft of functional rug-making. It was hoped that the experience would stimulate interest and foster the learning of skills and techniques associated with an ancient craft. There was the possibility, too, that new design ideas might grow out of the experience. Everyone in the community, at any level of ability was invited to make a floor rug, choosing any method, whether weaving, knitting, hooking, macrame, or crocheting. Information about techniques available was widely disseminated.

Mid-wife to the Great Event was the truly indefatigable Marj Richey, appointed by the Crafts Board to act as National Co-ordinator. I asked Marj about her background in the years which have given her the store of knowledge which she has drawn upon to make the project successful beyond reasonable hopes.

Marj Richey's first steps towards arts and crafts were taken, she says, through music which she studied when young. In the 'sixties she ran the Richey Galleries in Melbourne and became a foundation member of the Crafts Board. She loves to communicate with people and feels that the Rug Event has established a network of communication with people all over Australia through the direct and personal contact she has had with them during the past two years. She regards herself as having been a catalyst in the process; to the observer she appears like the hub of a huge wheel!

The Crafts Board, with Moira Kerr as the responsible Senior Project Officer, has now published the last of its four Newsletters on the National Rug Event, each one containing a progress report from Marj Richey, and

detailed information from Moira about the regional activities through which that progress was being achieved. The record is lively and interesting and it shows clearly how much help people can give to one another as they work together in a venture which appeals to them in a direct and warmly imaginative way.

Communication has been simple but effective, through Marj Richey, Moira Kerr at the Crafts Board, the Board's Newsletters and the co-operation of the media, particularly Babette Hayes of Woman's Day who launched the idea of the National Rug Event in that magazine. The idea, which was simple and bright, caught on and enthusiasm mounted as the word spread. A series of explanatory slide kits on rug making was produced by the Resource Centre of the Crafts Council of Australia. These include many regional techniques from other countries — including Navajo Rug Weaving and Khellim rugs. Navajo Indian rugs were also toured in Australia by the Crafts Board of the Australia Council as were the beautiful Iranian Lion rugs from Fars.

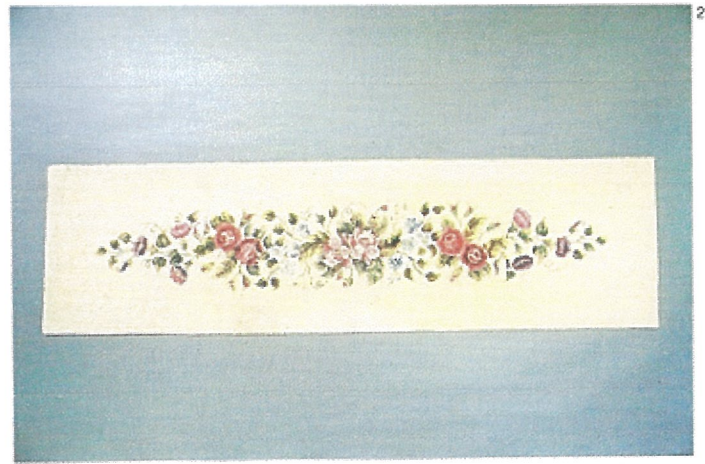
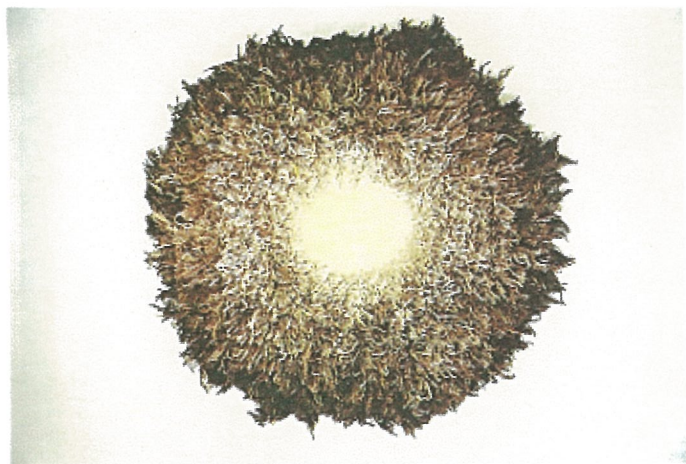
Each regional area approached its problems of organisation in its own way, finding venues, judges to select rugs which would represent the region, ways of publicising the event, of raising the money necessary to support local activities associated with it.

More than 90 regional groups were associated with the event and many thousands of persons actively participated in all kinds of different capacities.

Marj Richey said: "Each region worked very hard on their own particular project and the exciting part is that the whole country assembled exhibitions which were shown in a great many towns throughout Australia and lasting three months, but many more months were needed to organise the whole event. They all helped one another to put on what must now be classified as 'the greatest show on earth'.

"There were exhibitions organised by people who had never been involved in such a project before and also

Photography by John Delacour
courtesy of the Crafts Board
of the Australia Council.



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*Bartholomews Studio,
Busselton WA Rya technique;
Warp-wool, Weft-linen. 180 cm
x 125 cm*

2
*M. I. Moss, SA
Rag Runner 'Summertime' —
Hooked; old woollen materials
bleached and dyed. Hessian
base 228 cm x 62 cm*

3 Helen McMurtrie, VIC
Weft, Handspun Lincoln fleece

4 Merrill Dumbrell, VIC
Tapestry technique. Weft:
Wool 175 cm x 150 cm

5 Lorna Mitchelson, VIC
Loop or Hooked Rag Rug.
Weft: Woollen rags, old
garments on rug mesh.
170 cm x 94 cm

6 Gay McLennan, VIC
Handwoven; Hand spun.
164 cm x 98 cm

7 Jennifer Mary Seaton, TAS
Woven Rag Rug. Weft: Cotton
rags. Warp: Cotton.
191 cm x 112 cm

8 James L. Deghand, TAS
Woven Rug — Tapestry
technique. Weft: Handspun
single ply mohair Alpaca and
natural wool. Border vegetable
dyes.
250 cm x 112 cm

9 Rachel Frecker, NSW
Tablet technique. Woven in
one piece using 160 tablets.
Handspun wool, vegetable
dyed.
228 cm x 84 cm

10 Rosemary Whitehead, SA
Rya technique. Weft: Finger
spun staples, vegetable dyed,
Lincoln fleece and mixed
black wools. Warp: Cotton.
180 cm x 120 cm

people who had never exhibited before. The end result was displays that were colourful, well set-up and viewed by thousands of people.

"For the first time people learned to contact one another and find out what was happening in their own region. They also learned to approach galleries, councils, radio and television stations, the press and other bodies for support and co-operation. In some places there was so much interest that craft groups are now being organised to continue to learn more about craft activities.

"So much was achieved and some very wonderful things appeared — the people in Hopevale, Queensland worked using their own traditional designs and colours to make large and beautiful floor rugs and in Tamworth, N.S.W. the committee expanded their activities to regional towns 200 miles away, giving demonstrations to mothers' clubs, church groups and schools.

"In Victoria the lovely old Castlemaine Market was used to exhibit the Regional Exhibition.

"In Doncaster a 'Rug In' was organised prior to their exhibition and men, women and children put down their shopping and school books to learn different techniques in rug making.

"At Daylesford 32 people worked together on a rug design, showing the birds, animals and farm houses and butterflies of their area. In one country town a festival was built around the Rug Event with a Scottish

piper and the Macedonian dancers and singers performing.

"In Adelaide, Elizabeth, Mount Gambier and the Eyre Peninsula successful exhibitions were held. Darwin attracted an enthusiastic response to their Regional Exhibition.

"In Launceston the organiser brought together a beautiful exhibition at the Design Centre. In Hobart and Zeehan, and throughout the rest of Tasmania, people co-operated to produce many more lovely rugs. People all over Australia showed that they wanted to make their regional exhibitions a success.

"Many people showed how much they enjoyed the project. It was a genuine community project where everyone had the right to make and exhibit a rug regardless of their ability and this produced some very exciting rugs, some embroidered, some woven, others made by knitting or knotting, rag rugs, and also rugs made by using the old techniques of working around four nails on a cotton reel.

"Although the Capital City Exhibitions were terrific, I feel the very important part of the Rug Event was the 90 Regional Exhibitions shown throughout Australia. That was where grass roots were, and that was where the people organised the exhibitions, made their rugs and put on the show for all the town to see. It has given me tremendous satisfaction to know that people can work together and make things happen if they want to."

Jutta Feddersen who flew to each capital city to make



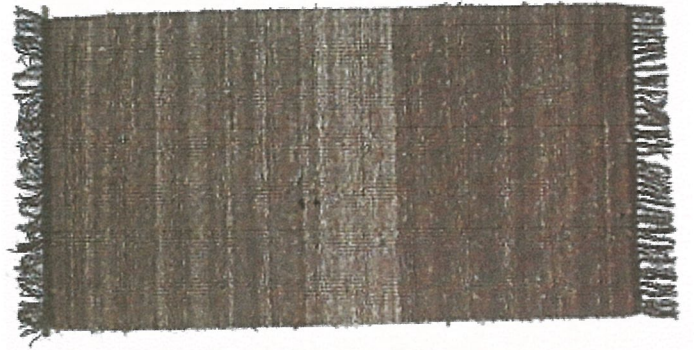
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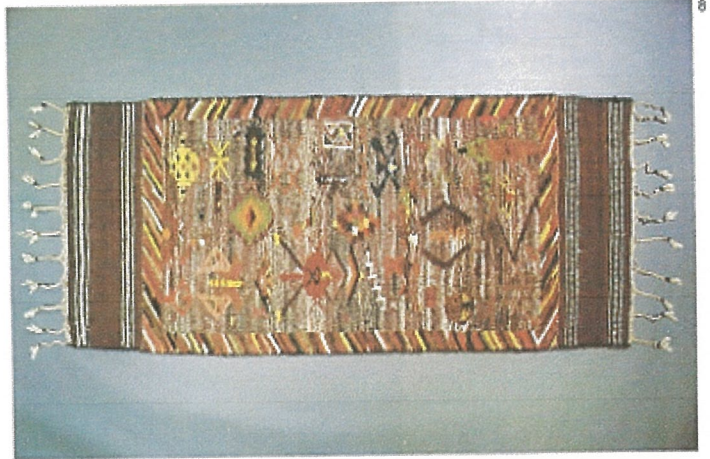
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Detail of 10



Detail of 5

her final selection for the Travelling Exhibition dreams of the extraordinary beauty of Australia's natural environment, of the colours and shapes of the salt lakes as she saw them from the plane on her way to Perth, of the sand and the formation of the tiny islands off Brisbane and the way in which this natural beauty may one day influence design in rug making in Australia.

The work of Australian Aborigines in Queensland was praised; she also commented on the way in which the work of some community groups reflected their environment. She liked the colour and simplified design sense that the children's rugs expressed and commended the resourcefulness which the use of recycled materials showed. Three of the rugs selected for the travelling exhibition were made of recycled materials, each using a different technique.

The kinds of rugs which were made were not identifiably greatly different from one region to another. It seems that there was a surprising similarity throughout the community observable in the approach to design, though there was great ingenuity in the use of different fibres, especially of recycled materials.

Participants showed every level of skill. More experienced and technically expert rug makers demonstrated to the less experienced. Itinerant teachers travelled to give demonstrations in regional centres or to isolated groups, such as the group of prisoners in Pentridge Gaol with whom Lyn Greenwood shared her expertise.

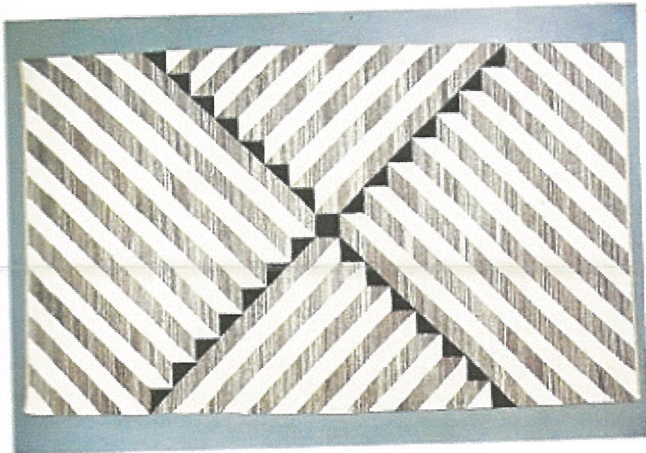
Experienced or not, rug makers in their enthusiasm picked up what they felt they needed to enable them to make the kind of rug which appealed to their level of ability, suited to their financial resources.

For the next two years the Travelling Exhibition of the 14 rugs bought by the Crafts Board, which opened recently in Canberra will tour Australia taking the rugs back to show people in all the regional areas just what was selected.

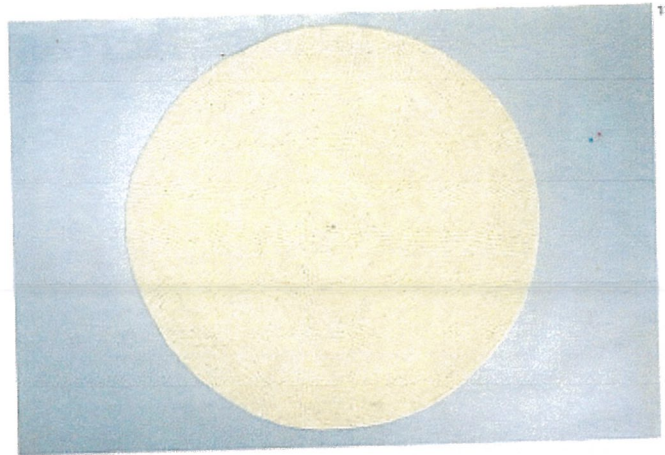
Marj Richey talks warmly of the way in which the Rug Event has opened up a new era of experience for her and for everyone who took part in it, far beyond even the 5000 Australians who made rugs. What seems to her the most important part of all this is the way in which participation has shown the kinds of resources which are available in the community and where they are, how to gain access to them, how to make use of them in future community projects. It has shown people that they have abilities to use in ways that had been formerly unsuspected.

More people now know of their State Craft Associations, the Crafts Council's Resource Centre and where to get information to help them develop their craft skills. Because the meetings and exhibitions have been held in galleries many more people have now become interested in arts and crafts, buying work, enjoying an awakening. Indeed, some people who might never have visited a gallery or exhibition of art or craft work in their lives before are regularly visiting galleries and now participating in craft classes.

Many stories have been woven with the rugs. Each rug holds memories for those who made it and for those who came to see it. It took time to draw all the strands together in their place in the whole design, a relatively



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14

Beatrice Eugenia Oliveras, NSW
Tapestry technique.
Handspun wool.
250 cm x 150 cm

Fran M. Keech, QLD
Queensland Verandah Mat.
Crocheted; Natural flax.
130 cm dia.

Eileen Decmal, QLD
'Quinkan' (Spirit Man) Tufted,
commercial wool.
1675 cm dia.

Hopevale Home Crafts, QLD
'Cave Paintings' Tufted;
commercial wool.
2745 cm x 1980 cm.

slow but rewarding process. Stages of growth and development were evident. Beyond each finished rug was the prospect of local display, beyond the regional exhibitions beckoned the bright lights of the capital city exhibition in each state and later still the encouragement of the touring exhibition bringing to every regional centre the rugs selected finally to represent each state.

Our English word *rug* would seem to have its closest affinities with Scandinavian words suggesting roughness, with the Norwegian dialectal *rugga* meaning *coverlet* and even with the Swedish *rugg* meaning ruffled hair. A photograph in a local paper (Orange District) of schoolchildren lying on the rugs to be shown in a regional exhibition, their fingers plunged into the long shaggy pile, spoke more directly to me than words of the way those children felt about the rugs, that there was warmth and comfort to be sustained from contact with them, that they had enjoyed being involved in making them, in having the fun of creating something together with their hands.

Does the craft of rug making have a more promising future in Australia as a result of the "National Rug Event"? Certainly, many more people know about the craft itself, however what augurs extremely well for the future is the knowledge and expertise which has been learnt from such a successful nation-wide community self help project associated with a craft.

All kinds of community strengths have been discovered and developed through regional groups in a spirit of friendliness. The independence and self-propelling energy of the regional groups were the mainsprings. Those involved were able to organise their effort entirely in their own way.

I cannot altogether resist the conviction that the idea of the rug has certain inherent and associated qualities, the way it feels to the touch, the warmth of it and its evocation of earth and home that are preconditions for success at the "grass roots" or any other level where people are involved.

Robin Marsden