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Author(s): Gerald L. Pocius

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Hooked Rugs in Newfoundland

*The Representation of Social Structure in Design**

AFTER THE DRINK AND SONG of the twelve days of Christmas mummering had subsided, and the men of the community turned once again to preparing their nets for next summer's cod, the women of the Newfoundland household assembled the family's rug frame in the corner of the warm kitchen, and began to hook the two or three new rugs (locally called "mats") that were made every winter. While she sat over the burlap stitched into the frame, the out-port woman created patches of pattern and color, expressive of her own innovative fancies, or those of her community. Those mats with community designs often were found in the kitchen while the more individualistic patterns were placed in the parlor. The design on these rugs, their cosmetic dimension, became an important form of folk art in the Newfoundland culture.¹

To hook a rug, a woman sewed a piece of burlap, which would act as the backing for the rug into a frame. A design would then be drawn on this burlap.

*Much of the research for this study was funded by the Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies, National Museum of Man, Ottawa, and was conducted from May to December, 1974. Supplementary fieldwork took place in August, 1976, and July to December, 1977. Although rug hooking still takes place today, much of my fieldwork dealt with rugs made during the past thirty years. Background material for this study, a discussion of the technical processes, and data on other textile crafts will appear in a monograph of the Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies Mercury Series, *Textile Traditions of Eastern Newfoundland*. I would like to thank the National Museum for permission to use part of the data from my study in this essay. An earlier version of this paper was read at the American Folklore Society meeting, November, 1976, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The final form of this essay has greatly benefited from the criticisms of Henry Glassie, Peter Kurtze, Shelley Posen, Bernie Herman, and Neil V. Rosenberg. I would especially like to thank those many Newfoundlanders like Greta Hussey and Mary Margaret O'Brien who so warmly welcomed me into their homes.

¹ For historical surveys of the development of the hooked rug generally see Marius Barbeau, "The Origin of the Hooked Rug," *Antiques*, 52:2 (1947), 110-113; Ramsay Traquair, "Hooked Rugs in Canada," *Canadian Geographical Journal*, 26 (1943), 240-254; William Winthrop Kent, *The Hooked Rug* (1941; rpt. Detroit: Tower Books, 1971); Leonard F. Burbank, "More About Hooked Rugs," *Antiques*, 2 (1922), 213-218; and Joel and Kate Kopp, *American Hooked and Sewn Rugs: Folk Art Underfoot* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1975).



Figure 1. Mary Margaret O'Brien of Cape Broyle hooking a block pattern.

Rags would be cut or torn into strips and then hooked through the burlap mesh following the pattern. The rug hook used in the process was made from a nail attached to a wooden handle. The head of the nail would be cut off, and a small notch was filed into the top of the shaft to be used in pulling up the rag. The actual process of hooking the rug was identical no matter what portion of the rug was being hooked. Thus the design that appeared on the surface of the rug was independent of the technical process; it was a function of the colors of the rags used. Each rug was constructed in the same manner, but the surface design was determined by the individual woman, through the colors of rags she used, such as Mary Margaret O'Brien's version of a block mat (Figure 1).

Within the Newfoundland hooked-rug tradition, a woman had two major choices in the selection of a design. She could adopt the community's norms and utilize a geometric pattern that had been widely used over time. Or, in contrast, a woman could elect to be innovative, and introduce a design outside the community's repertoire, either from commercial sources, or more commonly her own composition.² To be innovative with design, a woman usually

² I am using Barnett's sense of innovation "as any thought, behavior, or thing that is new because it is qualitatively different from existing forms"; see H. G. Barnett, *Innovation: The Basis of Cultural Change* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1953), p. 7.

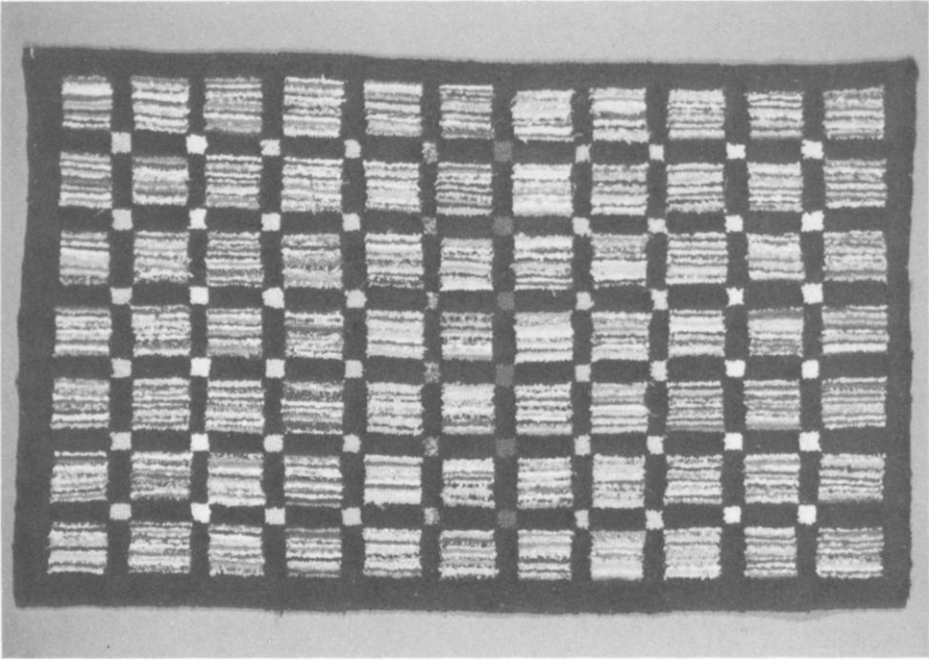


Figure 2. Block pattern rug. Each square is hooked with various colors bordered in black. From Cape Broyle.

relied on models—what we could consider antecedents—not previously thought applicable for a rug design. Looking at these two major design styles of Newfoundland hooked rugs, this choice between conformity and innovation becomes clear.

One major hooked-rug tradition is characterized by geometric regularity, with designs marked by repetition and symmetry (Figure 2). This type of design was often drawn with some kind of straight edge, or the actual strands of the burlap backing could be followed to ensure uniformity. Cardboard templates were also frequently used to guarantee that the final design was balanced.³ Many rugs were hooked with a simple block design, a series of multicolored squares repeated over the entire surface; this type was often called an “inch” rug, since the squares were often a specific number of inches per side.⁴ Diagonal lines created diamond patterns, and these geometric figures

³ For the use of cardboard templates in quilt making see Earl F. Robacker, “Piece-Patch Artistry,” *Pennsylvania Folklife*, 13:3 (1963), 7. See Figures 5 through 7 for examples of mats based on stencil designs.

⁴ For a discussion of the inch pattern see Stella Hay Rex, *Choice Hooked Rugs*, (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1953), p. 29.

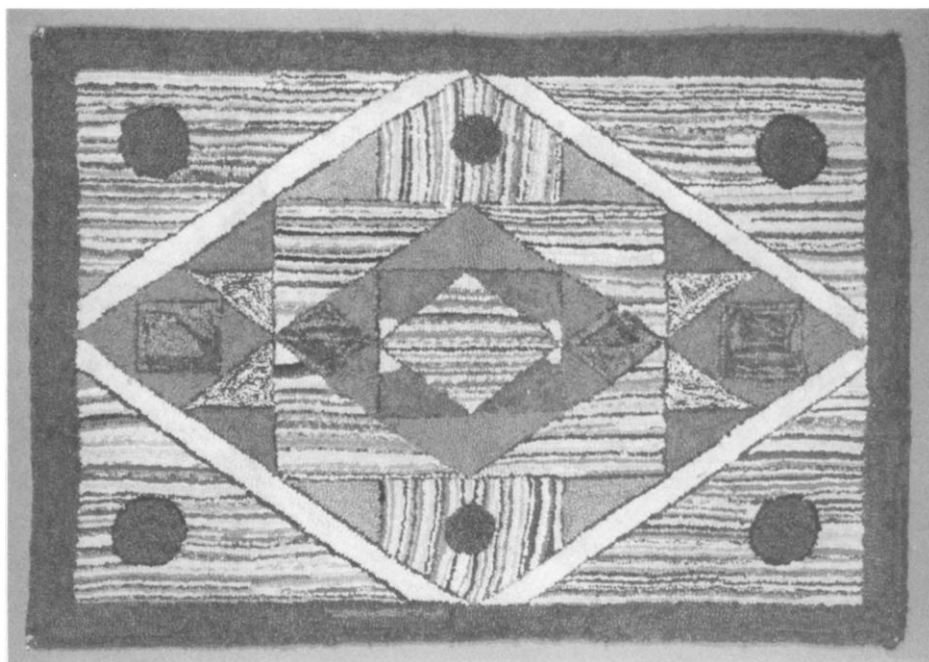


Figure 3. Large geometric pattern with diamond center subdivided into smaller segments. From Cape Broyle.

were subdivided using contrasting colors. Similarly, large geometric figures were composed, and lines of color intensified the symmetry within the design (Figure 3).

The geometrical style of hooked rug relied primarily on a limited number of designs, and radical alterations of these pattern-types did not occur. Like quilts, many of the hooked-rug designs became so widespread that they received names, indicating their regional acceptance as discrete designs. Through naming, their continued use was ensured. Greta Hussey of Port de Grave, for example, hooked a rug two years ago using what many Newfoundlanders, including Mrs. Hussey, identify as the "Boston Pavement" design. A close connection was generally evident between the hooked-rug and quilt traditions, with both relying on a common body of designs considered appropriate. For example, the "Double Irish Chain" pattern was found on quilts and rugs.⁵

⁵ For examples of the Irish Chain pattern on quilts see Lilian Baker Carlisle, *Pieced Work and Applique Quilts at Shelburne Museum* (Shelburne, Vt.: Shelburne Museum, 1957), p. 3; Loretta Harrison Conger, *Quilt Sketches* (Eugene, Ore.: Lane County Pioneer Museum, 1974), p. 9; Marguerite Ickis, *The Standard Book of Quilt Making and Collecting* (1949; rpt. New York: Dover Publications, 1959), pp. 80–81; Rose G. Kretsinger, *The Romance of the Patchwork Quilt in America* (1935; rpt. New York: Bonanza Books,

However, unlike quilt making, where designs came almost exclusively from antecedents within the folk tradition, a radically different style could be chosen for the hooked rug.

In contrast to the geometric designs dependent on widespread antecedents, a woman could hook a rug using almost any design that she desired, creating a style with only one large, and sometimes asymmetrical, motif filling the center. Forsaking the geometrical patterns, she chose to rely on her own individual models to formulate a design. She looked around her home and its surroundings, transforming visual images into potential rug designs. These images were visualized in a two-dimensional or three-dimensional mode, each requiring varying degrees of innovation for use. An innovative spectrum can be posited, ranging from those design antecedents most resembling the form of the desired rug, to those requiring the greatest degree of visual alteration for use as a design.

Two-dimensional images were most easily adapted for design use on a hooked rug, and these required the least degree of alteration. An image that was the same size and dimension as the rug could often be copied directly onto the burlap backing. Emma Spracklin from Brigus, for example, borrowed a design from the surface of another textile. Pointing to a hooked rug in her kitchen, she commented: "Sometimes you'll see a fancy cloth, and it got lovely designs on it. And you'll put that down and trace it off on a piece of paper. I think that [pattern] came from a bedspread." This kind of borrowing expresses the design antecedent most directly.

Commercially produced burlap backings could be purchased that contained predrawn designs that permitted a simple transference from one surface to another. These rugs were known as "stamped mats" and basically followed the norm of a large, often asymmetrical, central motif.⁶ Greta Hussey borrowed a design for a rug that she hooked in 1966 from a commercially produced rug, and when she hooked the same design six years later she copied directly from her older rug, only slightly altering it.

In other instances, the two-dimensional design source had to be enlarged or reduced, thus requiring greater skill and innovation on the part of the maker

n.d.), pp. 94–95; Marilyn Lithgow, *Quiltmaking and Quiltmakers* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1974), p. 48; and Carleton L. Safford and Robert Bishop, *America's Quilts and Coverlets* (New York: Weatherlane Books, n.d.), p. 118.

⁶ For comments about commercial hooked-rug designs see Burbank, pp. 213–218; and Kopp, *American Hooked and Sewn Rugs*, pp. 80–81. These designs were actually stamped on the backing using embroidery stamps; see Irene Dodge, "Philea Moxley's Embroidery Stamps," *Antiques*, 102 (1972), 251–255.

who used it. Daisy Roberts of Brigus borrowed a Mother Goose scene from a children's book, and Gladys Barrett of Spaniard's Bay relied on a pictorial calendar for a scene of ducks in flight. Even printed words could serve as a design source. Hannah Walsh of Holyrood hooked several rugs using adages found on printed cards she bought in St. John's.⁷ One rug shows "Honor Thy Father and Thy Mother," while another contains "What Is Home Without a Mother." Mrs. Walsh also turned to larger design antecedents. One of the rugs in her front room contains two eagles and an adage, "Golden Eagle On Flight." Although she claims that this pattern "just came into my head," it is no coincidence that she lives next to the Golden Eagle refinery and that a gas station advertising sign in Holyrood shows the Golden Eagle in flight.

When a three-dimensional object is used as a design pattern, the creator can be innovative not only by transforming that object into a two-dimensional rug format. She can also indicate the degree of her individuality by the very *choice* of a specific object as a source from the myriad of objects that surround her. For example, the most widely used objects are those that closely approach a two-dimensional format. Greta Hussey used to place her hand on the burlap and trace its outline, producing a pattern resembling a maple leaf. Rosie Adams of Bishop's Cove hooked a rug containing a leaf pattern by using a different kind of template. She explained: "I got a plant in there, house plant. It's called a fig plant. Did you ever see a fig plant? It's great big leaves on it. And one of them withered off, y'know, and it dropped off. So I just took it and put it down on a piece of paper and marked it over and cut it out."

The highest degree of innovation with design sources involves the mental assemblage of ordinary objects into an image to be used specifically for a rug, and not merely an attempt to copy a concrete holistic model. Elizabeth Clewe of Ferryland, for example, visualized a number of fish caught in the harbor, combined them into one image, and surrounded them with stylized waves on the rug she made. Similarly, Queenie Maloney of Bay Bulls designed a countryside scene, with flowers in full bloom (Figure 4).

In some instances, a creator wanted to use a three-dimensional object as a design pattern, but did not feel capable of transforming it into a two-dimensional format. A good example of this process and its results was reported by a

⁷ These cards are most likely the broadsides containing such adages sold by John Jones in St. John's up until around 1970; for Jones and his work see Harold Paul Mercer, "A Bio-Bibliography of Newfoundland Songs in Printed Sources," M.A. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1978, pp. 101-106.



Figure 4. Pastoral scene with trees and sky textures using various shades of green and blue. From *Bay Bulls*.

visitor to Newfoundland in the 1920's.⁸ She had traveled to the island in order to purchase hooked rugs for her collection. On one side trip, she encountered a rug that contained a design that she initially took to be a "jellyfish with octopus-like tentacles." Upon discussing the pattern, she discovered that the maker had captured a young cat, held it down on a burlap bag, and traced the outline of its squirming, struggling features. The creator had managed to be innovative, but perhaps not to the degree that she had intended.

From gas station signs to struggling cats, one specific style of Newfoundland hooked rug relied on innovative design antecedents. However, the use of these individual patterns does not necessarily mean that Mother Goose or ducks on a calendar were used on rugs only by the individual who first adapted them. In some cases, these innovative designs were immediately borrowed by

⁸ See Elizabeth Waugh and Edith Foley, *Collecting Hooked Rugs* (New York: Century Co., 1927), pp. 76-77. I would like to thank Coleen Lynch Pastore for calling my attention to this reference.

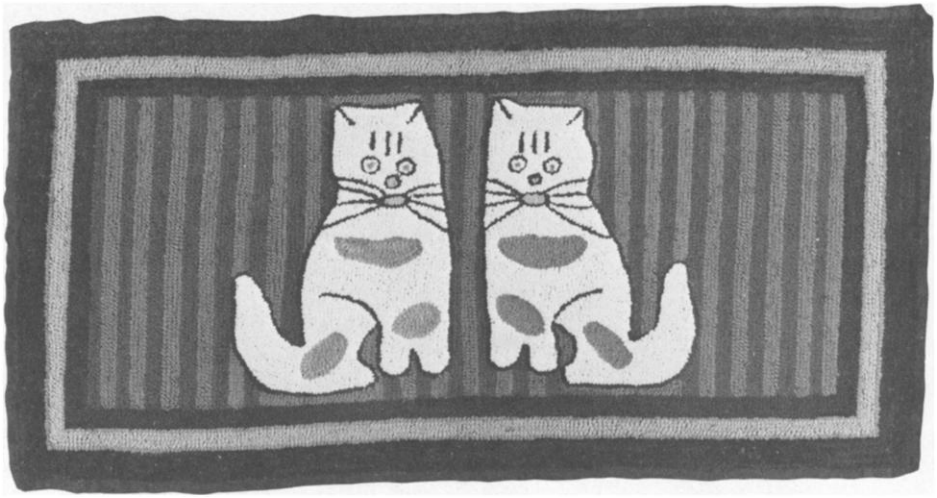


Figure 5. Mat hooked by Mrs. Louise Belbin, Grand Bank, Newfoundland, with two cats pattern. Mrs. Belbin uses stencils for this design.

other community members. Sometimes I marveled at the intricacies of what I thought to be a unique design, only to see it in the next house or community that I visited. Mary Margaret O'Brien of Cape Broyle told me that a new pattern "would be going all around. Maybe everybody would have that if they saw it, y'know, one giving it to the other, that way, like passing the buck." Similarly, when I asked Greta Hussey if she tried to create new or different designs, she replied: "No way could you be different. We'd start something different but everyone in the cove wanted to have one like it."⁹ What was new often became quickly accepted.

As Greta Hussey's comments indicate, the origins of hooked rug designs were as much influenced by social concerns as by individual fancies. Choice was between two major design categories, each tied to particular attitudes toward local norms and traditions. Many rugs relied on accepted, symmetrical patterns, often so widespread that they were named and had a geographical and temporal distribution. At the same time, rugs were designed that relied on individual images borrowed from any number of sources. Thus, the tradition presents the extremes of stability and innovation, but instead of an individual making a choice between conformity (expressed in the use of geometric antecedents) and individuality (in the use of a unique antecedent), most women

⁹ This desire to obtain new patterns parallels Ives's findings that singers often sought out new songs. Such attitudes obviously point to the inaccurate characterization of folk culture as basically conservative; see Edward D. Ives, "Lumbercamp Singing and the Two Traditions," *Canadian Folk Music Journal*, 5 (1977), 17-23.

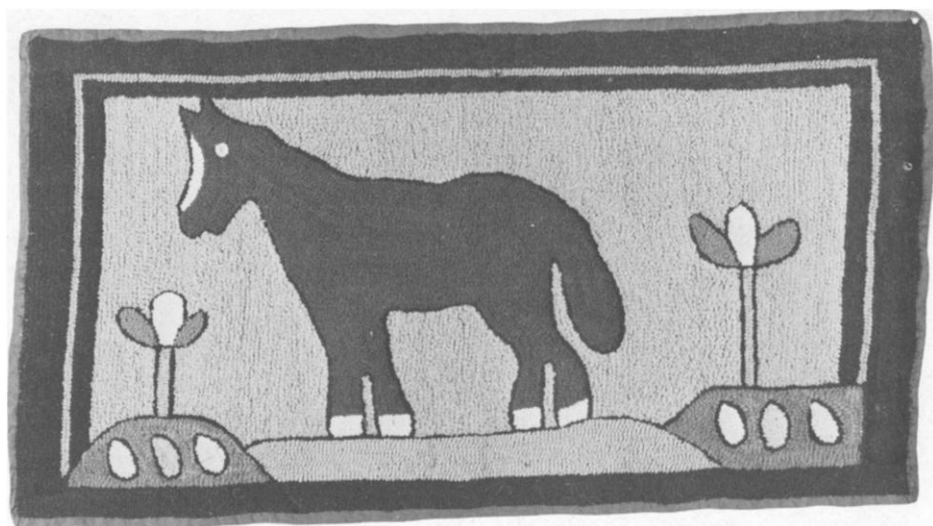


Figure 6. Mat hooked by Mrs. Louise Belbin, Grand Bank, Newfoundland, with a horse pattern. Mrs. Belbin uses stencils for this design.

used both styles.¹⁰ This creation of two styles of rug design reflects a specific social order, a connection made clear by a recent study.

In an essay first published in 1961, John L. Fischer discussed various art styles and their relationship to social stratification.¹¹ Among other conclusions, Fischer posited that egalitarian societies produce art styles marked by repetition of simple, symmetrical elements, whereas hierarchical societies create styles characterized by asymmetrical nonrepetitiveness. If these findings are applied to Newfoundland hooked-rug designs, we initially recognize features of the two styles. Many rug designs are symmetrical and rely on antecedents that produce repetitive designs, though others contain unique antecedents that are often asymmetrical. If Fischer is correct in his findings, then the Newfound-

¹⁰ For a discussion of the creation of both styles by one woman see Gerald L. Pocius, *Traditional Newfoundland Mats: Louise Belbin, Grand Bank, Burin Peninsula* (St. John's: Memorial University of Newfoundland Art Gallery, 1978).

¹¹ John L. Fischer, "Art Styles as Cultural Cognitive Maps," *American Anthropologist*, 63 (1961), 79-93, reprinted in Carol F. Jopling, *Art and Aesthetics in Primitive Societies* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1971), pp. 171-192, and in Charlotte M. Otten, *Anthropology and Art: Readings in Cross-Cultural Aesthetics*, American Museum Sourcebooks in Anthropology (Garden City, N. Y.: Natural History Press, 1971), pp. 141-161. Two recent studies have used Fischer's model, and should be compared with the findings of my research; see John W. M. Whiting and Barbara Ayres, "Inferences from the Shape of Dwellings," in *Settlement Archaeology*, ed. K. C. Chang (Palo Alto: National Press Books, 1968), pp. 117-133; and Henry Glassie, *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia: A Structural Analysis of Historic Artifacts* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1975), especially pp. 181-182.

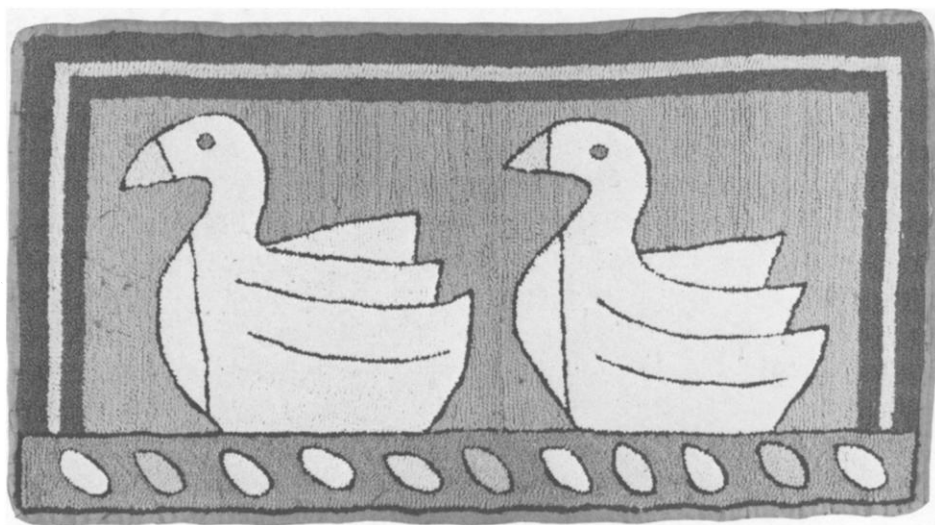


Figure 7. Mat hooked by Mrs. Louise Belbin, Grand Bank, Newfoundland, with two ducks pattern. Mrs. Belbin uses stencils for this design.

land hooked-rug tradition seems to point to the simultaneous existence of both an egalitarian and hierarchical society. That this may be the case, and that the use of the rugs is directly related to the social stratification become evident when the social organization of the community and the specific use of the rugs within the home are identified.

Before Newfoundland joined Canada in 1949, the livelihood of most communities depended on the production of only one commodity—fish. The vast majority of adult males were fishermen.¹² An almost feudal economic system existed whereby one community resident, the merchant, supplied all the community's manufactured goods and much of its food, while providing the only outlet for the sale of fish. Merchants supplied goods to the fishermen on credit, and payment had to be made by the latter in fish at the prices set by the merchant. The merchant class, therefore, held a privileged economic and social status in each community. The merchant's house and business were immediately evident in each community, a contrast to the humble homes of most

¹² For a survey of the history of the Newfoundland fishery see Keith Matthews, *Lectures on the History of Newfoundland, 1500–1830* (St. John's: Maritime History Group, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1973); for introductions to Newfoundland fishing today see *North Atlantic Fishermen: Anthropological Essays on Modern Fishing*, ed. Raoul Anderson and Cato Wadel, Newfoundland Social and Economic Papers No. 5 (St. John's: Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1972).

fishermen. Mary Elizabeth Maloney of Bay Bulls acknowledged the merchant's status by referring to this class as "the aristocracy of Bay Bulls." Each community had only one or two merchant families, and the fisherman was keenly aware of their control of his life. One ballad from central Newfoundland bitterly cursed the merchants of Fogo, beginning: "Come all ye toil-worn fishermen, combine and lend an ear / Beware of those cursed merchants, in their dealings they're not fair / For fish they'll give half value, they will sacrifice it sore / If it's under eleven inches, for Madeira it will go."¹³

Besides the merchant, the clergyman was generally considered of a higher social status than the fisherman. The church was literally the central focus of most Newfoundland outports, and the clergyman was its representative. While he was most likely held in a higher esteem than the merchant, the clergyman was not totally spared the attitude of ambivalent respect in some dealings with community residents.¹⁴

If we look at the organization of the outport, then, we see that basically it was egalitarian in terms of the vast majority of residents, the fishermen.¹⁵ At the same time, however, it was hierarchical in terms of a tiny minority, the merchant and the clergyman. This social pattern is integrally connected to the use of specific hooked-rug styles within the home.

Traditional Newfoundland houses usually contain two large rooms along a hall and parlor design that are the focus of almost all social interaction within the home.¹⁶ The kitchen is the scene of most outport social activity, both within the family and among neighbors—in short, among equals. After a recent wedding in Calvert, for example, neighbors, friends, and members of the immediate family all gathered in Tom Sullivan's kitchen for several hours of drinking. We all sat in the crowded kitchen, although the front room was empty and only several feet away.

¹³ Elisabeth Bristol Greenleaf and Grace Yarrow Mansfield, *Ballads and Sea Songs of Newfoundland* (1933; rpt. Hatboro, Pa.: Folklore Associates, 1968), pp. 304–305. Poorer quality Newfoundland salt cod was often classified as "Madeira" and sold to the Spanish and Portuguese markets, primarily to Brazil.

¹⁴ In the Newfoundland community that he studied, John Szwed found that there were just two classes, insiders and outsiders. Besides visitors, merchants and priests were considered members of this outsider class; see John Szwed, *Private Cultures and Public Imagery: Interpersonal Relations in a Newfoundland Peasant Society*, Newfoundland Social and Economic Studies No. 2 (St. John's: Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1966), pp. 153–156.

¹⁵ This egalitarianism is discussed by Szwed, pp. 84–95.

¹⁶ For comments on traditional Newfoundland house types see David B. Mills, "The Development of Folk Architecture in Trinity Bay," in *The Peopling of Newfoundland: Essays in Historical Geography*, ed. John J. Mannion, Social and Economic Papers No. 8 (St. John's: Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1977), pp. 77–101.

When either the clergyman or the merchant visited a home, however, special honor was paid him by bringing him into the front room, referred to simply as “the room.” In this room that contained the family’s finest belongings, these privileged community residents would be entertained, away from the noise and smell of the kitchen. If this front room is considered primarily the scene of hierarchical interaction and the kitchen that of egalitarian interaction, then the hooked-rug styles, following Fischer’s model, should repeat this division.

In fact, this is exactly what they do. The symmetrical, geometrically repetitious rugs—those with community design antecedents—are used almost exclusively in the kitchen. These “egalitarian” designs are displayed in the context where equals would meet. On the other hand, those rugs with individual antecedents are used in the front room where hierarchical interaction takes place. Greta Hussey explained that this latter type of rug was often covered with oilskins to keep anyone from stepping on it. When the minister came, the oilskins would be removed. Tom Roberts of Brigus commented that “some of the old people always had a lovely mat ready if they saw the minister coming.” They would “grab it and drop the mat down” in the front room. After the guest left, the rug was stored until the next visit.

The designs of Newfoundland hooked rugs point to their use within the two major rooms of social interaction, one egalitarian, the other hierarchical. The rugs used in the kitchen were those first seen by every visitor, indicative of the primary emphasis on egalitarianism. Individuality, expressed in both the innovative cosmetic dimension of the rug itself and in the social relationships of hierarchical society that produce these designs, was banished to the front room. It was a space seldom used and opened only for those often treated with ambivalent respect. Like individuality and social stratification, the innovative rug kept in the front room was rarely seen, although its existence was acknowledged. Finally, it was the block rug found in the kitchen that provided a clearer pattern of the intricate social cooperation of much Newfoundland folklife.

Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. John's