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## Portland Press Herald    Maine Sunday Telegram

### Art and craft

The two become one when Mainers like Susie Stephenson painstakingly create heritage handiwork.

By MEREDITH GOAD Staff Writer

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#### CLEANING UP

HOW DO YOU care for a hooked rug?

SUSIE STEPHENSON says the best way to wash a hooked rug is in

the snow. Rub snow on the rug and then brush it off with a

whisk broom. She does not recommend handwashing.

YOU CAN USE a lint brush to spruce up a rug. Stephenson

occasionally vacuums hers, but not on a high suction setting.

#### SEE STEPHENSON`S WORK

TO VIEW MORE of Susie Stephenson`s work, visit her Web site at

[www.mainemats.com](http://www.mainemats.com). Her rugs have also been featured in the

book ``The Creative Hooker`` by Jessie Turbayne.

EDGECOMB — Most parents tuck their kids` drawings of dinosaurs and dragons into a box that gets stored in the attic somewhere. Susie Stephenson incorporated her four children`s artwork into a hooked rug.

In addition to the reproductions of those primitive drawings, the rug includes outlines of the children`s (they`re now teenagers) hands, along with their initials. Stephenson`s daughter is deaf, so her hand in the rug says ``I love you`` in sign language. There`s also a figure of a boy wearing No. 13, the number one of Stephenson`s sons wore when he played baseball.

``It`s a very personal rug,`` Stephenson said.

Stephenson`s work is an eclectic mixture of old and new that, for the second time, has landed her in Early American Life`s Directory of Traditional American Crafts. Only three Maine artists, out of hundreds of nominations, were selected by the magazine this year in a national competition that`s judged by curators and other experts from the American Folk Art Museum, the Shelburne Museum, the Historical Society of Early American Decoration and several other organizations.

In addition to Stephenson, Windsor chair makers Fred and Priscilla Chellis of Little River Windsors in Berwick also were chosen.

The directory honors artists who still make fine furniture, tinware, pewter, paintings and other heritage American crafts the old-fashioned way. And that means it has to be more than just something that is handmade — after all, these days, ``handmade`` could mean ``Made in China.`` Some of the artists who submit their work make their own raw materials, perhaps using their own hand-spun wool.

The artists also have to know what makes their work historically accurate, and if they deviate from that they have to be able to explain why it`s not quite right. An artist might use three motifs that are consistent with a historical period, for example, but maybe they were never combined before in that particular way.

``It`s as much about showing your scholarship as your craftsmanship,`` said Tess Rosch, publisher of Early American Life. ``To copy something, just to be a good woodcarver,

without understanding why it's correct is not to be in the same league."

#### HEIRLOOMS OF THE FUTURE

In the case of hooked rugs, anyone can go out and buy a hooking kit with a pre-made backing and ready-made strips of fabric. But Stephenson considers that akin to trying to paint a masterpiece using a paint-by-numbers set.

Stephenson uses natural dyes that she makes from onion skins, teas and coffee. She dyes her wools over her fireplace, and sometimes smokes material with a little bit of black. She uses only fabrics from clothes she finds in second-hand shops, and she hand-cuts and rips the fabric into strips herself. By working in this way, she has more control over the color and texture of her pieces.

"When you're doing it yourself, you play around with color," she said. "Something might not look quite right, and you move it around. If I dye something and it doesn't come out right, then I save it and use it in a different rug later."

But Stephenson does occasionally use other dyes, and some of her themes are not exactly early American. She has hooked her pets, including her dog Sam and numerous cats, and mermaids and the ocean are frequent themes in her work.

A rug titled "Goddess Within" that won a judge's award at the Common Ground Fair came to Stephenson in a dream. It's a rug that features the form of a naked woman wearing African fertility earrings and includes all kinds of personal references – flowers because Stephenson likes to garden, a coffee cup because she likes to have coffee or tea with friends.

In 2005, the last time Stephenson was included in the Directory of Traditional American Crafts, she submitted photos of the rug that reproduces her children's artwork rather than something more traditional, "and that was risky," Rosch said. "It's not an art show, it's an artists' show."

Until recently, Stephenson, who is 44 and a retired schoolteacher, did not feel comfortable calling herself an artist. She only took up hooking rugs 14 years ago because her mother urged her to try it. She kept up with it because "it's so much fun."

"I never thought I was artistic," Stephenson said. "I knew I was creative, but I never started calling myself an artist until two years ago. I never took an art class. This is folk art. This is raw, just art of the common man or woman."

All of Stephenson's creations do have a primitive look, even those that draw on themes from her modern life. A rug in her kitchen says "Enough is an Abundance," a phrase her family lives by that could just as easily have come from a 17th- or 18th-century home. And her rugs often incorporate personal items, such as red fabric that came from a shirt Stephenson was wearing when her husband proposed to her.

The rugs are, in essence, heirlooms of the future.

#### EACH RUG HAS A QUIRK

Stephenson's rugs also have their own quirks that are kind of like inside jokes. Each viewing often reveals some new little surprise that wasn't noticed before.

One creation that hangs on the wall of her home features a smiling fox in the center of the rug, based on a local fox that sometimes sneaks into the yard to snatch one of Stephenson's rare breed chickens. In three corners she has hooked chickens, but in the fourth corner there is simply a lone feather, supposedly all that's left of the chicken after the fox has had his lunch.

“He's a crafty old fox,” Stephenson said. “I like to do animals. They've got such character.”

She is working on a mermaid rug in which 12 mermaids are swimming toward the center of the piece. Each mermaid represents a different woman who has influenced Stephenson's life, including her mother, daughter, sister and friends.

Each has a unique tail, and the mermaid that represents Stephenson doesn't have a tail at all -- one of those quirks that Stephenson suspects most people won't see right off the bat.

“I have only my own patterns, and I don't like to do the same pattern over again,” she said. “It's the artist in me, I guess, coming out. So each one is an original, one of a kind.”

Stephenson signs each rug because she thinks it's a shame that people who practiced this craft long ago never did, and there is no way to recognize them for their work. Her signature often comes out of hooked houses in the form of smoke.

Stephenson displays her rugs at the Stable Gallery in Damariscotta and works on her rugs there every Tuesday. A show featuring her work will be up through August. Among the pieces on display are “Pownalborough Courthouse 1761” and “Folk Art – Two Chickens,” two more traditional pieces she entered in the Early American Life contest this year.

Stephenson also accepts commissions, charging \$150 to \$200 per square foot, depending on the intricacy of the design. One family wanted a rug depicting their farm. Another woman asked for a rug showing the home where she had raised her children, and gave Stephenson a bag of old clothes to use in the piece. The finished rug includes pieces of the mother's favorite skirt, the grandmother's favorite blue dress, the grandfather's blazer and the daughter's cheerleading outfit.

The biggest issue seems to be: Who will get the rug when it's passed down to the next generation?

In the case of the rug with the childhood drawings, Stephenson has told her children that the rug can rotate among their houses, spending a year at each. She has also given them permission to cut it into four pieces, or sell it and split the

proceeds.

`` Oh, they laughed so hard`` at that suggestion,  
Stephenson said. `` It was a really, really fun project to do.``

Staff writer Meredith Goad can be contacted at 791 -6332 or  
at:  
mgoad@pressherald.com

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