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## Scandinavian Rugs

In the early 20th century, a new generation of women designers applied their talents to rug weaving. The result: an array of dazzling, geometric beauties

By Celia Barbour

You'd dream of meadows, too, if you were trapped indoors through months of bitter cold and crushing darkness—of meadows swaying with wildflowers, and sun-dappled birch forests, and summer twilights mirrored in tranquil lakes. And were you possessed of the skill and inclination, you might find yourself weaving those dreams into soft, bright rugs steeped with warmth and whimsy.

Scandinavia has an ancient tradition of domestic weaving. That's no surprise; most regions of the world do. But in Scandinavia, the link to these nature-based themes wasn't severed when stylistic upheavals—Art Nouveau, Art Deco, modernism—swept through Europe in the 20th century. Instead, the new movements were grafted onto homespun roots, resulting in patterns that are wholly unique. "The Scandinavians infused their folk art into modernism," says Joseph Hakimian, of the New York City rug gallery F. J. Hakimian. "They made it more charming."

This charm didn't survive by accident, however. Starting in the mid-19th century, the Swedish government, along with nonprofit groups, began sponsoring programs in textile arts to ensure that traditional



Marta M  s-Fjetterstr  m, left, at her workshop in Sweden, 1923.

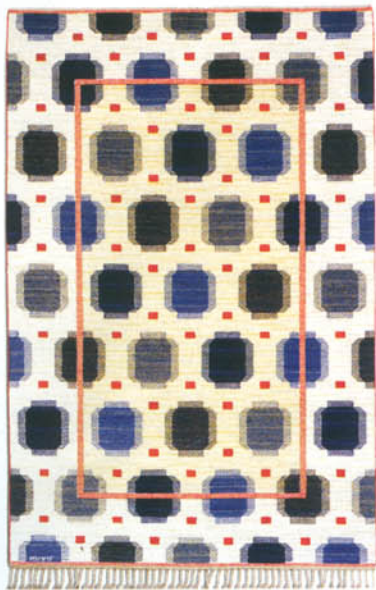




Hästhagen by Måås-Fjetterström, 1923.



Fasad, vit by Marianne Richter, 1963.



Blåplump by Måås-Fjetterström, 1937.



A 1930 Måås-Fjetterström rug in a Manhattan loft.

skills and legendary motifs would survive the onslaught of industrialization. Hundreds of young women from rural areas learned to weave, allowing them to earn extra income while supporting a national cultural agenda.

One such woman, an artist named Märta Måås-Fjetterström, was drawn to rug weaving. She began sketching tapestry designs and winning awards for them. By 1905, she had been named director of an important workshop in Malmö. Unfortunately, her creative independence aggrieved the authorities. She didn't want to copy the old patterns; she wanted to breathe new life into them. In 1911, Måås-Fjetterström was fired and spent a year "hibernating," as she wrote to a friend. She emerged more determined than ever, and, before the decade was out, she had her own workshop and a staff of 20 weavers. Soon, all of Stockholm wanted rugs with the initials MMF woven into the border.

"She went against all the odds, becoming a leader in a field where there were no innovators and no women," says Nader Bolour, owner of New York's Doris Leslie Blau Gallery and author of *European Vintage Rugs 1920s–1950s*. In 1925, her work was exhibited at the Paris Expo, and in 1929 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Måås-Fjetterström died in 1941, but her impact on Scandinavian rugs continued. Renamed MMF AB ("AB" means Ltd.), her workshop nurtured some of the century's most brilliant textile designers, notably Barbro Nilsson and Marianne Richter, whose own initials can be found woven into the borders of their creations. Whereas Måås-Fjetterström treated a rug like an artistic puzzle to be solved geometrically, Nilsson and Richter "had more of a sense of how a carpet functions in a space," says Hakimian. They played with energetic patterns and clear, bright colors, all balanced within stunning compositions.

Meanwhile, across Scandinavia, the production of traditional rugs continued in homes and small workshops. "There's a quality to these handmade textiles that just doesn't exist anywhere else," says Kim Hostler of Hostler Burrows, a New York gallery specializing in modernist Scandinavian design. She attributes this, in part, to the economic system.

"Because of socialism, people didn't have to worry about whether they'd be able to afford good schools or health care. If they loved a craft, they could afford to pursue it and still have a decent quality of life."

These rugs remain a good value—for the moment. You can expect to pay from \$5,000 for a small area rug to \$200,000 for an 18-by-20-foot carpet woven with Barbro Nilsson's initials. According to Bolour, who acquired a collection that had been held privately for generations, interest is growing.

It's hard not to fall under the spell of these enchanting textiles. "Even the simple geometric ones are so interesting," says designer Bunny Williams, who frequently uses them in her interiors. "Geometrics can be cold and hard, but these are softened by whimsy. They work in so many different kinds of rooms, whether a traditional space or a modern setting."

Bolour agrees. "When you see a 20th-century Swedish rug with an 18th-century Directoire console, it's like magic," he says.

Indeed, these rugs ensure that a room feels welcoming. "They're relaxed," says Hakimian. "You can walk on them in blue jeans and bare feet and feel right at home." It's as if you can sense summertime woven into each soft, bright fiber. ■

## WHERE TO FIND IT

Designs by Märta Måås-Fjetterström, Barbro Nilsson, Marianne Richter, and others are still being woven by hand at MMF AB and can be made to order in various sizes. Contact the studio at 011-46-43-17-01-83; [mmf.se](http://mmf.se).

Vintage Scandinavian rugs can be found at these galleries:

- Doris Leslie Blau, New York City, 212-586-5511; [dorisleslieblau.com](http://dorisleslieblau.com)
- F. J. Hakimian, New York City, 212-371-6900; [fjakimian.com](http://fjakimian.com)
- Hostler Burrows, New York City, 212-343-0471; [hostlerburrows.com](http://hostlerburrows.com)
- Mansour, Los Angeles, 310-652-9999; [mansourrug.com](http://mansourrug.com)