

Spontaneous Hooking

DRAWING FROM WHAT'S INSIDE

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY GWEN DIXON

"If we focus on what's going on inside of ourselves, sensations, emotions, the patterns of our thoughts, a wealth of material can be found."

—Rick Rubin, *The Creative Act: A Way of Being*, 2023



Treats, 8 1/2" x 8 1/2", hand-dyed merino on burlap. Designed and hooked by Gwen Dixon, New Brunswick, Canada, 2023.

I have sometimes wondered if I could rug hook spontaneously with few constraints, in an unplanned way, and based on my own experiences...



Pink Path, 13" x 13", hand-dyed merino on burlap. Designed and hooked by Gwen Dixon, New Brunswick, Canada, 2023.

Over the 2023 Christmas holidays, my husband, Jim, and I settled into a quiet daily routine of reading, eating holiday treats, and relaxing. I was reading *The Creative Act: A Way of Being* by Rick Rubin, and his thoughts on taking inspiration from the inner world and playing with making appealed to me.

A few days into the holiday, I started thinking about hooking. I had gathered beautiful, hand-dyed merino wool during the summer months. The wool beckoned me from its basket in another room, but I had no pattern ready or in mind. "Just start hooking," I thought, but I wondered, "Could I hook a piece with just the thoughts, feelings, or images in my mind? Could I make something that I would be happy with? Or would I become frustrated and end up wasting my beautiful wool?"

Our Christmas plans had been so simple that I had few distractions. Our presents had been wrapped and delivered, and the menu for the two of us was basic. I wanted to be present to enjoy our time and holiday treats, listen to music, and talk over coffee. And now, I wanted to hook, to make something with the wool I had gathered.

SIX SPONTANEOUS RUGS

For each piece, I drew a square or rectangle outline and stitched around the edges of the burlap, but I drew no pattern. The first piece was *Treats*. I used multicolor wool and played with it by hooking it in any direction and experimenting with the placement of colors. I ate gumdrop cake and thought about Christmas treats I had loved as a child, such as sugar cookies in Christmas shapes with icing and sprinkles on top.

Next was *Pink Path*. I love peonies and have a large cluster of them in my front garden. They grow quickly, and my cluster gets larger each year. Last spring, I planned to place some buds in the freezer so I could see them open during the winter. But like many things, I didn't do it in time, and despite my enjoyment of the winter holiday season, I was thinking about spring and my pink peonies.

The Tube started as irregular circles. I randomly hooked circles here and there, filled their centers with white, and then placed ends of wool bits into the very center, just for fun. When I finished hooking, I noticed that this piece seemed to curl and could easily form a tube shape. I stitched it together, stuffed it with roving



Prairie Crossroads, 14" x 14", hand-dyed merino on burlap. Designed and hooked by Gwen Dixon, New Brunswick, Canada, 2024.



The Tube, 3" x 18", hand-dyed merino on burlap. Designed and hooked by Gwen Dixon, New Brunswick, Canada, 2023.



The **WOOLERY**[®]
Your Fiber Journey Starts Here!

FABRIC - HOOKS - KITS - AND MORE!

woolery.com





Pods, 12" x 12", hand-dyed merino on burlap. Designed and hooked by Gwen Dixon, New Brunswick, Canada, 2024.

wool, and felted the ends in place. I liked that while making this piece, I followed the ideas that I had as I went along. It was a playful process that I continued until the piece felt finished.

In early January, I visited a new wool shop and found beautiful, multicolor, hand-dyed wool in blues and golds. This wool reminded me of seeing the prairie provinces for the first time during a car trip across Canada with my family when I was 10 years old. I remember looking at the fields of grain and the sky from the back seat of a car. The colors were magnificent, but the land was so flat that even the meeting of another road felt interesting. In *Prairie Crossroads*, the wool suggested what it would become.

Next came *Pods*. This piece has many meanings for me and reminds me of critters living underground and people living in their homes during the winter months. These days, with the cost of housing and other factors, I am thinking about how sad it is that not everyone has a “pod” to call home.

The last piece was *Summer Meadow*. I am inspired by the landscapes made by other rug hookers, and I wondered if I could hook a landscape spontaneously. I started with three bulky wools in three colors. I mostly hooked across the mat, but sometimes hooked with a slight slope. I added more colors and finer wools as I went along.

REFLECTIONS

I enjoyed hooking spontaneously, but it did have some challenges. During the hooking of each piece, I had a lot of self-doubt. The making seemed precarious—like it could go awry at any time. I wondered if the pieces would form a cohesive whole, be decipherable, and have meaning.

The wool I used was hand-dyed merino; I found the touch of its fibers soothing and enjoyed the way it easily came through the openings in the burlap and relaxed onto itself on top. I played with the wool and found inspiration in the wool itself.

For me, the mats are decipherable and meaningful. Some of the rugs reflected something I was longing for, such as peonies and a summer meadow. Others provided opportunities to try something new and play while rug hooking. Often, the mats were based on memories or things I feel strongly about, such as Christmas treats, family vacations, and the idea of home.

In making each mat, I revised something that I had tried but didn't like. Some mats hooked up quickly, and others took longer to come together. I used basic hooking, wool that I loved, and ideas that were on my mind.

Overall, and despite the periods of self-doubt, I found this method of hooking to be therapeutic and meditative, and I know that my spontaneously hooked mats will improve if I continue to practice hooking



Summer Meadow, 22" x 11", hand-dyed merino on burlap. Designed and hooked by Gwen Dixon, New Brunswick, Canada, 2024.

this way. If you would like to try it, have a look at the thoughts and strategies I noted during the making of these mats.

THOUGHTS & STRATEGIES

Hooking spontaneously may be a new approach to hooking for you. It may change the way you think about rug hooking. Here are some thoughts based on what I read in *The Creative Act: A Way of Being* and what I experienced when hooking that may be helpful:

- Each piece is a collaboration between the art that you have already seen, your previous pieces, your experiences, and who you are today.
- Lower the stakes and leave perfection behind. The pieces you are making, especially at the start, may not be your best. They are a beginning, but you will see a progression in your making. The result of each piece

is the piece itself, plus the useful information you'll gain for making the next piece.

- Normalize your doubts. You will have self-doubt when you begin to hook this way, and maybe at the beginning of each new piece. Accept this, because acceptance will reduce the influence of doubts on your work.
- Value your own voice. Your work shows who you are and your unique perspective. Put aside thoughts of what someone else might think about it.

Here are some “hands-on” strategies for hooking spontaneously:

- Start with a small piece.
- Use wool that you love—how it looks and how it feels.
- Try multicolor, hand-dyed wool.

“The story of spontaneity can be misleading. We don’t see all of the practice and preparation that goes into priming the artist for the ‘spontaneous’ event to come through.”

“Even spontaneity gets better with practice.”

—Rick Rubin, *The Creative Act: A Way of Being*, 2023

BENEFITS OF SPONTANEOUS HOOKING

Spontaneous hooking is a nondirective way of hooking that can be playful, original, expressive, and intuitive. These pieces are from my inner world, and while they have meaning to me, they may still require explanation for others to make sense of them. I loved making them and plan to make more pieces in this way.

There are reasons other than enjoyment to try hooking spontaneously. The positive feelings of surprise and discovery are also part of spontaneous rug hooking. You may not know what the piece is truly about until after it's finished, and you may find that your piece represents a feeling or thought that you can't express with words.

Additionally, hooking spontaneously allows you to experience hooking in a new way, and you may discover new techniques or strategies that contribute to your overall making and creativity—or discover a color combination that you really enjoy but might not have tried in a patterned piece. Imagine what you can make when you apply a new approach to your entire hooking experience and skillset.

Finally, you may be more present when making this way, as you'll make decisions based on your preferences and intuition. This may engage more of yourself in the process—that is, you may have the feeling of being “immersed” in the activity or experience “flow,” which helps reduce stress.

I hope you try it, and if you do, feel free to let me know what you think! **RHM**

- Limit your practical choices, including colors, textures, and sources of inspiration—restricting the latter to one or two words or remembered images.
- Prepare the burlap by stitching around the perimeter. Draw an outline of the size and shape of the piece on the burlap.
- Look at an uncomplicated template, then start with that general shape in your mind. Or start with an image of a motif and repeat it.
- Don't cling too tightly to your first idea. You may need to let it go. It may be a starting point only.
- Spontaneous hooking may use the repetition of a shape, line, or direction. With each repetition, you'll learn something to use in the next one. Remain aware of what you are learning, and use this as you go along.
- Savor the “aha” moments, when you realize how your piece represents something you have been thinking about.
- Remember that you might not know what the piece is or what it is about until it is done. The piece might simply have been about playing with hooking and doing what you wanted to do with the materials.
- If the wool suggests something to you or reminds you of something, feel free to let that guide you.
- Tune in to what enlivens you as you hook and make decisions based on those things that create a spark.
- Have faith in your ability to experiment.
- Look at lots of images when you are not hooking. Let them make an impression on you. Use those impressions when you sit down to hook.

Gwen Dixon is a fiber artist and adult educator who lives, makes, and writes in New Brunswick, Canada. Find her online at gwendixonwoolarts.com.



Nistock Farms

▶▶▶ From this
▼▼▼
To this

Collapsible rug hooking frames, frames and supplies for punch needle embroidery and Oxford punch work. Custom orders welcome!


www.nistockfarms.com
Prattsburgh, NY (607) 522-4374



Debra Henkel
Handmaiden Designs

Wool Applique Punch Needle Primitive Hooked Rugs
Woolery & Stitcheries Gifts from the Heart

www.handmaidendesigns.com
debra@handmaidendesigns.com
708.866.4477



Colorama

Swatches • Specialty Dyeing
Color Planning • Private & Group Lessons

Vivily Powers
Certified McGown Teacher

36 Fairview St.
Manchester, CT 06040
(860) 643-2341
coloramawool@gmail.com