

Rag rya from the middle of the 19th century is a beauty to behold in both color and form.
Page 25: André Enkler and Eva Hakanen discuss the different materials used.



RECYCLED BEAUTY

RAG RYAS AT ROSLAGSMUSEET IN NORRTÄLJE

BEAUTY IN THE SPARSE, in that which is born of necessity, is something we regard with mixed feelings. Admiration that someone skillfully utilized the already-used to make it useful once more, but also sadness that the maker was in such need that this threadbare reuse has been necessary. Patching patches, mixing waste yarns, small bits of fabric, and leftovers of all kinds to make something new and useful.

The exhibition ÅTER(I)BRUK currently on view at Roslagsmuseet in Norrtälje is focused on the rag rya that exemplify this kind of reuse. It's a beautiful exhibition. The walls are



covered with woven and knotted rya where basically everything imaginable has been mixed in: old and worn, but aesthetically pleasing in the combination of materials and colors. Many questions arise. When were these made? How and for what purpose? Where have they been preserved for hundreds of years without losing their radiance?

The knowledgeable staff of three, consisting of museum CEO Lina Lindström, Antiquarian Eva Hakanen, and collections curator André Enkler, give me a tour and answer as many of my questions as possible. It turns out that these rag rya, slitrya, bed coverings (there are many different terms for these objects), they are all based on the simple sheepskins that were used as coverings both on beds and outside in fishing boats. These woven versions had many advantages. The size could be more easily adjusted to suit the person or persons who would sleep under it. It could be washed, didn't smell or get moldy, and wouldn't stiffen like skins did when they got wet. The earliest examples, called slitrya, were narrow and with wool pile of different lengths and densities, depending on where in the country and for what purpose they were woven. The oldest that are documented are from the 16th century, some from Vadstena Convent but mostly from the shuttling of Gustav Vasa's troops between castles in the 16th and 17th centuries. Even fishermen began to replace their animal skins with knotted blankets.

Animal skins were used with the fleece or

fur side down toward the body, and slitrya were used the same way, with the pile side down and the smooth side up. The wool pile was undyed white, while other side might have borders and stripes. To avoid the pile knots being seen on the smooth side, the ground was often woven in twill, goose-eye, or bird's-eye. The knots could easily be hidden under the weft floats in these structures.

Over time, these rya developed into small masterpieces. The pile sides were decorated with colorful stylized flowers, borders, and hearts. When used as a coverlet, they were turned pile-side up during the day and then turned over with the warming pile towards the body at night. On Åland and in parts of Uppland, they developed a more advanced way of knotting: colorful patterns on the pile side and a layer of monochrome pile on the side that was normally smooth! As these were more difficult to produce and required more material, they were often woven as wedding rya with the couple's initials and the wedding year inwoven on the patterned side.

The rya at Roslagsmuseet were woven between 1800–1850. As they were mostly intended for use on beds in the home, they're larger than earlier examples, now measuring 2 x 2 meters. All are woven in two sections and sewn together. The warp is often cotton or linen, the weft of wool singles and the knots are all kinds of material. You use what you've got, and that doesn't mean that all of these rya

A creative mix of hard-spun wool, stranded yarn, and cotton rags in the pile.



Above: The smooth back side was often woven in twill, fishbone twill, or bird's eye twill.
 Below left and page 27: The oldest object in the exhibition, a doublenotted wedding rya from the late 18th or early 19th century, has pile of thin, plied wool yarns. The back side of this double-pile rya has pile of monochrome wool.



come from the poorest homes, but rather was a practice for reuse even in households with better economic standard. Previously, the law required that all used linen and cotton



material from households would be collected for the paper industry, but in the 19th century, when paper began to be made of wood, households could reuse their textiles themselves. So from the early 19th century, every scrap of worn clothing, thrums from weaving, waste yarn, and more were used to make rya. Some people even frogged threads from small pieces of fabric, pounded them with water in a butter churn, dried them, and then carded them with new wool which was then spun into a useable but lower-quality yarn. This was often children's work.

When on a routine visit to the Torsten Nordström Museum in Norrtälje, André Enkler happened upon a pile of "rags" in the attic. These were the rya that are currently shown at Roslagsmuseet! He admired the creative blends of wool yarn, linen yarn, and fabric strips of different types and colors. These should be exhibited somewhere, he thought, while at the same time knowing that the provenience and other background facts were missing. The rya had been made in the home. Sometimes a drifter would come by and trade a rya for money or food. Rya weren't seen as valuable objects either; in estate inventories they're often marked with a generalized term, "lapprya" or "patch rya".

At about the same time, the Antiquarian Eva Hakanen had written a thesis at Uppsala University about rag rya and Roslagsmuseet was set to reopen after a multiyear renovation. This was a wonderful opportunity to put these pieces together.

The exhibition ÅTER(I)BRUK stands on three legs. The first is the collection of historical rag rya, these objects that convey knowledge of material and color choice. The second is the craft – the weaving technique then and now. The "now" is represented by Vega Määttä Siltberg, member of the weaving group Studio Supersju. She weaves rag rya on a very sparse ground. The "pile" is very long, of mixed quality and with weft of transparent plastic. The third is about our using – and abusing – textiles. The textile industry produces far more textile than our part of the world needs. Much of it is used one time and then thrown away, or even worse: ordered en masse from low-wage countries, tried on, and sent back because it didn't suit the buyer. After which they're discarded or even burned!

Note: The exhibition ÅTER(I)BRUK at Roslagsmuseet in Norrtälje is on show until August 17, 2024.

