

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Textile Society of America Symposium  
Proceedings

Textile Society of America

---

9-2012

## History Under Foot: Politics, Patriotism, and the "Liberty Rug"

Amy Poff

University of Maryland, [afpoff@yahoo.com](mailto:afpoff@yahoo.com)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf>

---

Poff, Amy, "History Under Foot: Politics, Patriotism, and the "Liberty Rug"" (2012). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 730.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/730>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

## History Under Foot: Politics, Patriotism, and the “Liberty Rug”

Amy Poff

[afpoff@yahoo.com](mailto:afpoff@yahoo.com)

On December 2, 1916, against the bustling background of the New York harbor, President Woodrow Wilson officiated the floodlighting of the Statue of Liberty, the nation’s treasured gift from France thirty years prior. From his viewpoint on the naval yacht *Mayflower*, the President witnessed a military salute by ships from the Atlantic fleet and the overhead circling of aviatrix Ruth Law, whose plane’s fuselage lit up with the word “LIBERTY” while boats in the harbor tooted their horns against a backdrop of shooting flares. The star-spangled spectacle elicited gasps, cheers, and applause from the awe-struck crowd, and papers across the country covered the event, fueling war-time patriotism and a sense of American industrial triumph.<sup>1</sup>



**Figure 1: Liberty Rug. Manufactured by Shuttleworth Brothers, Amsterdam, New York, for W. & J. Sloane, c. 1917. Karnak Wilton rug; worsted wool, linen. 12' x 9'. Woodrow Wilson House, Washington, DC. Bequest of Edith Bolling Wilson to the National Trust for Historic Preservation. 61.16.100.**

Just over a year later, on January 26, 1918, New York-based merchants W. & J. Sloane presented President Wilson with a 9-foot by 12-foot Karnak Wilton carpet inspired in part by the historic lighting ceremony (Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> Woven by the Shuttleworth Brothers Company of Amsterdam, New York, and featuring at its center the Statue of Liberty surrounded by motifs representing America’s past and present, the rug remained in the White House throughout Wilson’s presidency before moving with him

<sup>1</sup> Coverage of the event was widespread. For an example, see “Statue of Liberty Flooded with Light,” *Aberdeen Sunday*

<sup>2</sup> Unidentified text excerpt, Liberty Rug curatorial file, 61-16-100, National Trust for Historic Preservation, Woodrow Wilson House Washington, DC.

to his private home in Washington DC. The house is now operated by the National Trust for Historic Preservation as the Woodrow Wilson House museum, where the rug resides today. Known as the “Liberty Rug,” this object represents not only the success of the American carpet industry, but also a Progressive-Era narrative about national identity, expressed within the framework of textile traditions borrowed from Europe and the East.

Carpet-making was one of the early industrialized trades in the United States. Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century, most carpets were luxury import items accessible only to the wealthy.<sup>3</sup> The popular mode of carpeting was wall-to-wall, which required large amounts of textiles and skilled installation, and yielded a great deal of waste. The emergence of new tariffs in the early nineteenth century made access to carpet even more difficult, encouraging small American manufacturers, who were cottage industries until that point, to expand.<sup>4</sup> Tariffs not only fostered industry growth, but created demand, resulting in a more receptive climate for domestically-produced goods.

The earliest known American carpet manufactory opened in Philadelphia in 1791, but the domestic rug industry was limited until the emergence of several carpet mills in New England, New York, and New Jersey in the 1820s.<sup>5</sup> These three areas remained the center of American carpet-making well into the twentieth century and their rapidly-expanding production required large factories and workforces, the latter of which came largely from England and Scotland where carpet-making was well-established. Even with the development of the factory system, American carpets were woven by hand until the 1840s, a time-consuming process that required skilled weavers and yielded a product that the average consumer found alluring but prohibitively expensive. As a result, carpets became one of the first domestically-produced luxury textiles in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

American inventor Erastus Bigelow’s introduction of the steam-driven power carpet loom in 1840 revolutionized the industry.<sup>7</sup> While early models produced at approximately the same speed as hand-operated looms (about 8 yards per day for ingrain carpet), less skilled labor was required, driving down prices, and the product was more consistent, yielding less waste in the matching of pieces. Within a decade, power looms could create as many as 30 yards of ingrain carpet per day, further reducing production costs.<sup>8</sup>

Factory-made carpets rapidly became an accessible floor covering for the American middle class, and prospective businessmen were eager to try their hand at running a carpet mill. By the time the industry peaked in the 1870s, there were 215 carpet factories in business in the United States. As competition increased and fashions changed, many small companies closed or were absorbed into larger businesses until, by 1937, the number of companies declined to about 50.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Helene von Rosenstiel, *American Rugs and Carpets from the Seventeenth Century to Modern Times* (NY: William Morrow and Company, 1978), 104; 112.

<sup>4</sup> von Rosenstiel, 94.

<sup>5</sup> Catherine O’Reilly, *Did Thomas Crapper Really Invent the Toilet?: The Inventions that Changed Our Homes and Our Lives* (NY: Sky Horse, 2008), 58; von Rosenstiel, 94.

<sup>6</sup> von Rosenstiel, 94-95.

<sup>7</sup> For detailed information on the importance of Bigelow’s contributions to the carpet industry, see Arthur Harrison Cole and Harold Francis Williamson, *The American Carpet Manufacture: A History and An Analysis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1941).

<sup>8</sup> von Rosenstiel, 96; 116.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

Amsterdam, New York was an important center in American industry, including carpet-making. The Shuttleworth Brothers Company, makers of the Liberty Rug, opened their business there in 1878 in the then-vacant Kline and Arnold mill adjacent to the Mohawk River.<sup>10</sup> Focusing on the production of Brussels and Wilton pile carpets, they introduced the popular “Karnak” brand of Wilton carpet in 1908.<sup>11</sup> Through a series of mergers and acquisitions that began in the early 20th century, Shuttleworth Brothers became Mohawk Industries, a textile, paper, and flooring company that still exists today.

The Liberty Rug is a Wilton carpet, a style whose supplementary warp structure creates a dense, cut pile. Woven in four separate 27-inch strips with a linen ground and worsted wool pile, the rug was sewn together and then finished at the top and bottom with knotted fringe. The strips for the Wilton and its looped-pile cousin, the Brussels, were – by the time the Liberty Rug was made – produced by jacquard looms. Known as luxurious, durable floor coverings, Wiltons were popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but the time needed to sew their seams and the potential for loss if the pattern lined up incorrectly made them costly to manufacture even within the factory system.<sup>12</sup>

Beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and lasting well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, rugs, rather than wall-to-wall carpets, became popular home furnishing items. Shelter magazines and domestic manuals touted the rug as an efficient, sanitary floor covering.<sup>13</sup> Rugs were economical as well, because they did not require specialized cutting to suit a room’s shape. This reduced both labor (there was no specialty skill required to unroll a rug) and material costs.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, thrifty decorators could turn rugs for even wear and move them around to change the look of a room.<sup>15</sup>

It seems appropriate that the Liberty Rug, a product created through the evolution of American labor, industry, and economy, should explicitly perpetuate related Progressive ideals. Stretching from the 1890s into the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Progressive era was marked by social activism and reform in all aspects of American life. Beginning as a grassroots movement and swelling into a national force, reformers worked across economic, social, and political lines. A reaction against Gilded Age grandeur and corruption, Progressive reform emphasized hard-work, efficiency, modernization, and scientific approaches as means to bettering society. This resonated with the growing American middle class, who were particularly responsive to Progressive ideology.

American president (1913-1921) Woodrow Wilson’s own faith-based ideas about service, ardent belief in Democratic evangelism, understanding of propaganda, and background as an academic strongly influenced his platform of Progressive reform, making him one of the most successful national leaders in the movement’s history. In April of 1917, believing that intervention was justifiable for the dissemination and protection of democracy, he led America into its first world war.

Wilson also fully embraced technology and modern industry, seeing them as a means for the betterment of society. In addition to the Statue of Liberty lighting, he participated in the first transcontinental call, and advocated for improvements in roads, the latter of which was needed to address the surge of vehicles Henry Ford was producing via the moving assembly line. Wilson was the first president to use

---

<sup>10</sup> Kelly Yacobucci Farquhar and Scott G. Haefner, *Amsterdam* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2006), 25; William Max Reid, *The Mohawk Valley: Its Legends and History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1904), 337-38.

<sup>11</sup> Hoover’s Inc., “Mohawk Industries,” *Hoover’s Handbook of American Business* 1 (2008): 575.

<sup>12</sup> Cole and Williamson, 109.

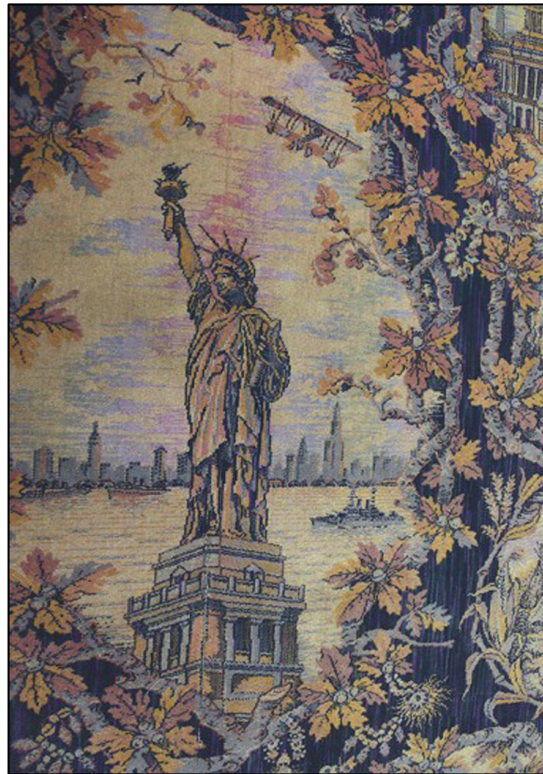
<sup>13</sup> von Rosenstiel, 122.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

motion picture technology for a campaign ad, and he continued to understand the value of media and image throughout his career, using both legislative and propagandist means to quiet those who spoke out against his government or the war. His fervent combination of social idealism and patriotism energized and reflected public sentiment during his presidency.<sup>16</sup>

Into this environment came Shuttleworth and Sloane's Liberty Rug, capitalizing on the interests of a nation swept up in its own identity and fueling the fervent patriotism of mainstream American culture. As one advertisement summarized: the Liberty Rug incorporated "a variety of motifs typifying noteworthy places, natural wonders and objects of national and historical interest which are symbolic of the marvelous growth and progress of America."<sup>17</sup>



**Figure 2. Liberty Rug, detail. Woodrow Wilson House, Washington, DC. 61.16.100.**

At the rug's center stands the Statue of Liberty, a plane flying above her and boats in the harbor below, set against the skyline of Manhattan (Figure 2). Moving clockwise from the Statue of Liberty, the central scenes (as described in period marketing materials) include: the Capitol with the Washington Monument in the background; a Native American tepee; ships intended to represent Columbus's "discovery" of America as he "braved the Western ocean in the picturesque Spanish galleon"; a Native American in profile; the Liberty Bell; Niagara Falls, a symbol not only of natural beauty but also, because of its relationship to travel, of the "mile-a-minute Express train of the Twentieth Century"; Independence Hall; the Panama Canal locks, touted as "the most wonderful engineering achievement of

<sup>16</sup> The Woodrow Wilson House Museum provides a broad overview of Wilson's life and politics. For more information, see works on Wilson by Arthur Link and John Milton Cooper.

<sup>17</sup> Gila Valley Furniture & Hardware, "The 'Liberty' Rug," advertisement in *Graham Guardian* (Stafford, AZ), March 22, 1918, *Chronicling America*.



modern times”; a buffalo; and finally, a “Prairie Schooner” – the Conestoga wagon that carried settlers across the west.<sup>18</sup> Among the “typical scenes” of progress past and present are “cotton on the wharves [in New Orleans], the industries of Pittsburgh; the oil wells of Oklahoma; the wheat fields of the West; the coal mines of Pennsylvania, transportation on the Mississippi River; California with its mamouth [sic] trees” and “George Washington’s famous Mt. Vernon mansion on the banks of the Potomac and... the little log cabin in which Lincoln was born.”<sup>19</sup> Three framing devices surround the rug’s motifs: silvery branches of oak leaves and acorns (the national tree), ears of corn in their husks (a symbol of American agriculture), and fronds of goldenrod (the national flower).<sup>20</sup>



**Figure 3. Liberty Rug, detail. Woodrow Wilson House, Washington, DC. 61.16.100.**

Iconographic analysis of the rug provides a window into American culture in the Progressive era. In addition to liberty and the protection thereof – an especially relevant concept given the country’s recent entry into World War I, progress appears as a central theme. The plane flying above the statue and the boats in the harbor signified not only American advances in industry and transportation, but also the events of the afore-mentioned lighting ceremony, seen as masterpiece of electrical technology. During a period of wartime uncertainty, the central motif also served as a powerful visual symbol of American military strength and allegiance. From the sea to the air, Liberty was protected, providing a reminder, according to the advertising copy, “of an obligation we owe today to [France], now our Ally, and our tried and true friend in the days when the Liberty Bell pealed forth from Independence Hall the first tidings of the Birth of Freedom.”<sup>21</sup> The Singer (1908) and Woolworth (1913) buildings visible in the New York skyline were recognizable, recently constructed examples of the power of American commerce and engineering, as was the Panama Canal, which opened in 1916 during Wilson’s administration (Figure 3).

<sup>18</sup> Press and advertising descriptions of the rug’s content are fairly consistent, suggesting the information was provided by W. & J. Sloane. See, for example: Gila Valley Furniture & Hardware, “The ‘Liberty’ Rug”; “An Interesting Effort of An American Designer: Originality Versus Tradition,” *Art & Decoration* 8 (Jan 1918): 128, Google Books; and “Liberty Rug Display,” *Merchant’s Display and Show Window* 42 (April 1918): 41, Google Books.

<sup>19</sup> Gila Valley Furniture & Hardware, “The ‘Liberty’ Rug”; “An Interesting Effort,” *Art & Decoration*.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Gila Valley Furniture & Hardware, “The ‘Liberty’ Rug.”

The juxtaposition of historical elements and contemporary life represents an appreciation of the past tempered by the Progressive-era drive to move forward. From galleons and wagons to airplanes and trains, from Wild West to big city, from farm to industry, the rug provides a series of sharp contrasts between life “then” and “now.” Additionally, many of the rug’s motifs address transportation not only as a symbol of progress and modernity, but as a unifying force, bringing together people and places across the nation, a powerful message in an international period of war and division. Historic sites, such as Mount Vernon and Lincoln’s cabin make connections with two vital American figures from wars past, legitimizing by association America’s role in the present war, while tying it neatly into the narrative of national progress.



**Figure 4. Liberty Rug, detail. Woodrow Wilson House, Washington, DC. 61.16.100.**

To twenty-first-century viewers, the inclusion of a the tepee, Native American profile, and arrowheads may seem a surprising embrace of cultural diversity. Audiences in the early twentieth century, however, likely viewed these images quite differently (Figure 4). Around the turn of the century, developing a distinct American style became an important aesthetic consideration, and design students were instructed to consider Native American themes and patterns as source materials indicative of a uniquely American experience.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, advertising copy for the rug (presumably based on information provided by the manufacturer) suggests that such symbols denoted the strength of Western settlers who were “menaced by roving herds of Buffalo and hostile Indians whose wigwams dotted that wild land.”<sup>23</sup> Ultimately, these images were included not because of the importance of native peoples as contributors to American history, but as references to obstacles that had been overcome, tamed by non-Native Americans’ tenacity and desire for progress.

<sup>22</sup> For one example of this, Mary Schoeser and Whitney Blausen, “‘Wellpaying Self Support’: Women Textile Designers,” in *Women Designers in the USA, 1900-2000: Diversity and Difference*, ed. Pat Kirkham (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 146.

<sup>23</sup> Gila Valley Furniture & Hardware, “The ‘Liberty’ Rug.”

Despite its modern production methods and message, the Liberty Rug conforms to a rug-making tradition with a long historical precedent in the Western world. The French carpet industry rose to prominence in seventeenth century when Henri IV and, later, Louis XIV saw textile manufactories and other nationalized production of decorative arts as ways to assert cultural and political might while bolstering the French economy. The carpets commissioned by Louis XIV for the Louvre were rife with visual symbols of his power and that of France. In the early nineteenth century, Napoleon briefly revived the luxury carpet-making industry as a means of re-establishing national power both symbolically and economically. Like the American Liberty rug, France's association of textiles and politics extended beyond message to production and use. Furthermore, the basic format of a central, symmetrical motif surrounded by an ornamental border reached back beyond the Sun King's time to the knotted pile carpets of the East that made their way into elite homes through trade routes and war. A January 1918 issue of *Arts & Decoration* ran an advertisement by W. & J. Sloane – the Liberty Rug's retailer – for “XVI and XVII Century Mosque Rugs” imported from the Eastern world, proclaiming that the carpets “stand today as examples of the highest art of that time and that people.”<sup>24</sup>

Clearly, the makers of and audience for the Liberty Rug were aware of such historical associations. Only a few pages after the W. & J. Sloane advertisement in *Arts & Decoration*, a full-page review of the new Liberty Rug notes its likeness to “certain old tapestries that celebrate national victories.”<sup>25</sup> The article begins its description of the rug by stating that “in this original conception the designer has undoubtedly been inspired by the fine traditions of ancient rug weavers, who originated the practice of introducing objects of adoration, [and] floral and animal symbols in the designs of their floor coverings.”<sup>26</sup> While the writer praised the decoration of the rug, he disliked the subtle color palette, noting that the designer had been apparently stifled by “his memory of rugs in which the color has been subdued by time.”<sup>27</sup>

This melding of modernity and history reflects America's position as a still relatively new country entering the international stage of war. By communicating modern ideas within a historical framework, the rug suggests that America brings the best of both worlds, and visually serves to legitimize the country's position by situating it within an accepted, established, aesthetic lineage. It also expresses the somewhat dualistic personality of Progressive thinking: the advances of the modern world supported by the values of the past.

While multiple copies of the Liberty Rug were produced, its production appears to have been limited. An account from the owner of another of the rugs, Sallie Maxwell Bennett, indicates that only twenty were made.<sup>28</sup> A quick survey of historic newspapers found advertisements for the display of the Karnak Liberty Rug in stores ranging from Washington, DC to Pueblo, Colorado. If Bennett's account is correct, no more than nine additional rugs were available to the public. While the veracity of her story is uncertain, it reinforces the aura of exclusivity that surrounded the Liberty Rug.

---

<sup>24</sup> W. & J. Sloane, “XVI and XVII Century Mosque Rugs,” advertisement in *Arts & Decoration* 9 (January 1918): 125, Google Books.

<sup>25</sup> “An Interesting Effort,” *Art & Decoration*.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Brian [last name not in file], “The Liberty Rug made by the Shuttleworth Bros. & [sic] given to President Wilson,” email correspondence, June 13, 2002, WWH curatorial file.



Interestingly, newspaper articles and advertisements of the period often refer to the Liberty Rug being “on display” or “on exhibition,” treating it as an art object and encouraging the public to come see it.<sup>29</sup> Among them, a January 27, 1918 advertisement in South Carolina’s *Charlotte Sunday Observer* instructs readers that the Liberty Rug at W. T. McCoy & Co. “is probably the most ingenious and interesting piece of workmanship that has been brought to Charlotte since the war began. It is worth a visit to see this wonderful rug” (Figure 5). This language is different than that used for many other rugs at the time, which focus more heavily on affordability, durability, and housekeeping concerns. The positioning of the Liberty Rug as an exhibit item suggests that it was intended as a marketing effort to draw buyers to stores. In fact, in her book *American Carpets and Rugs*, Helen von Rosenstiel specifically refers to Liberty Rugs as a “promotional item[s].”<sup>30</sup> A June 13, 2002 email from Sallie Maxwell Bennett’s grandson to the Woodrow Wilson House further states that many were sold as fundraisers.

Eloise Robinson’s short story, “White Elephants,” published in the July 1918 edition of *Harper’s Magazine*, supports the idea of the Liberty Rug as a fundraising item that captured the public imagination. In Robinson’s tale, young schoolgirls hold a white elephant sale to aid the war effort. The father of one of the students buys a Liberty Rug to donate to the sale “entirely of his own accord, happening to notice it as he passed by a downtown window, which shows that there are still a few parents who are kind and thoughtful as well as patriotic.” This Liberty Rug, whose details are strikingly similar to the Karnak rug, is described as a “wonderful work of art” and “surely a credit to any home.” Not wanting to be one-upped by her classmate, the young narrator of the story sets out to find an even better item than the rug, which proves to be a challenging order. While the story veers off to a comedic series of incidents surrounding the sale, the emphasis on the rug as a symbol of status and patriotism remains constant.

The Liberty Rug appears to have been among the higher-priced of Wilton rugs, something which doubtlessly added to its cache.<sup>31</sup> In February of 1918 it was advertised for sale for \$89 at Wanamaker’s in Philadelphia while other Wiltons of the same size ranged from \$49.50 to \$64.50, a price the advertisement noted was 25% below market.<sup>32</sup> In the account of the fictionalized Liberty Rug in “White Elephants,” the girls price their rug at \$1,000, a very high price but one they feel is warranted for charity. Ultimately, when their sale becomes a disaster, they receive only \$3.50, which they consider shockingly low. A more reliable sense of the range of rug prices in the period can be found in a December 1917 Boggs & Buhl department store advertisement in the *Pittsburgh Press*. While no price is given for their newly received Liberty Rug, they mention a large inventory of rugs “from the simple little braided rag rug at 85c to the finest Antique Kashan at \$3,500.”

<sup>29</sup> Boggs & Buhl, advertisement in *Pittsburgh Press*, December 10, 1917, Monday evening ed., NewsBank; “Big ‘Liberty’ Rug shows Highlights of U.S. History,” *Aberdeen Daily American* (Aberdeen, SD), April 16, 1918, NewsBank; “A Liberty Rug,” *Wilkes-Barre Times Leader* (Wilkes-Barre, PA), January 12, 1918, NewsBank.

<sup>30</sup> Von Rosenstiel, 16. This notion may have come from the family of Sallie Maxwell Bennett, who owned the Liberty Rug pictured in *American Rugs & Carpets*.

<sup>31</sup> Cole and Williamson, 232. The authors graph the price of carpet prices in the U.S., indicating that Wiltons were the most expensive, costing over three times more than an Axminster in 1920, and that prices rose steadily between 1900 and 1920.

<sup>32</sup> Wanamaker’s, advertisement *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 7, 1918, NewsBank.



*Figure 5. W. & J. Sloane advertisement, Washington Post, December 10, 1917. Reproduced from ProQuest.*

While the Liberty Rug was produced by Shuttleworth Bros., its market distribution was controlled by the New York-based merchandiser W. & J. Sloane. Sloane had their own showrooms but – based on what appear to be descriptions of the same rug being sold at stores throughout the United States – they also sold wholesale to other retailers. In their own advertisement in *The Washington Post* on December 10, 1917, Sloane referred to the Liberty Rug as the “finest example of Jacquard weaving ever produced” (Figure 5). Other sellers’ advertisements for the rug used adjectives such “interesting,” “original,” and “magnificent,” extolling it as a “novel design,” “one of the late triumphs of the rugmakers,” and a representation of the “best efforts of American designers.”<sup>33</sup>

Despite its apparent popularity, by 1919 at least one store was trying to sell a Liberty Rug at reduced price to make room for new stock.<sup>34</sup> The war was over, politics and design trends were changing, and the country was moving from wartime nationalism toward an embrace of exuberance and exotic cultures. Perhaps the overtly patriotic symbolism of the Liberty Rug, once an emblem of modernity, was now considered too sentimental or old-fashioned.

Regardless of the reason for its sudden fall from favor, the Liberty Rug was by no means Americans’ only experience with patriotic Statue of Liberty carpets. It simply appears to have been the most popular. There is, however, evidence of other “Liberty” rugs in the early twentieth century – a topic that warrants further study. And the subject re-emerged in the limited re-release of artist Keith Haring’s Statue of Liberty print as a rug to raise funds for American arts organizations affected by the September 11, 2001 acts of terrorism. Nearly one hundred years after the Karnak Liberty Rug’s use as a means of stirring up patriotism and possibly funds, history was once again under foot.

<sup>33</sup> This is a representative sampling of language based on a review of period advertisements for the rug, including those cited herein.

<sup>34</sup> John H. Pray & Sons, advertisement, *Boston Daily Globe*, January 16, 1919. ProQuest.