2018

Tapestry Crochet in the Americas, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East: Tradition and Innovation

Carol Ventura
Tennessee Technological University, CVentura@tntech.edu

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

Part of the Art and Materials Conservation Commons, Art Practice Commons, Fashion Design Commons, Fiber, Textile, and Weaving Arts Commons, Fine Arts Commons, and the Museum Studies Commons

https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/1112

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.
The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global

Textile Society of America 16th Biennial Symposium
Vancouver, Canada — September 19-23, 2018

Published in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings 2018

Presented at Vancouver, BC, Canada; September 19 – 23, 2018

https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/

Copyright © by the author(s).
Tapestry Crochet in the Americas, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East:
Tradition and Innovation
Carol Ventura
cventura@tntech.edu

What is crochet? *The Primary Structure of Fabrics* describes it as, “vertical and lateral interlooping . . . a double interlooped structure (made with a hooked implement).”1 Clothing and accessories have been constructed by looping fibers together for thousands of years. Looping is a broad term, though; we’ll look at a few of the variations.

The latest scholarship suggests that crochet developed around two hundred years ago from looping.2 No one is really sure where or when that first occurred, though. “Crochet” is the French word for "hook" and some people credit French nuns for inventing it, but there’s no proof. Crochet likely developed independently in several locations at various times. Other fiber arts required hooks, too, so old hooks can’t be used to establish an accurate crochet history. Only crocheted examples with verifiable dates can tell the real story. The undisputed earliest surviving crochet in European and American collections date to the 19th century.

Unfortunately, many pre-19th century looped pieces have been misidentified as having been crocheted because they look so similar. A piece needs to be very closely examined - or better yet reproduced, to verify its actual construction. They may look the same, but the 17th century English purse below left was looped, while the 19th century French purse below right was tapestry crocheted (from top to bottom)

![Left: Needle lace purse and detail, silk and metal thread, L. 2 1/4 x W. 2 in. (5.7 x 5.1 cm), first quarter 17th century, Britain, Rogers Fund, by exchange, 1929 Met Accession Number: 29.23.23; Right: Purse (France), early 19th century; silk, metal; H x W: 5 x 2 3/8 in. (12.7 x 6 cm); Gift of Mrs. Albert Blum; Cooper Hewitt 1953-106-4, http://cphhw.tti/o/2CgYt/.

Crochet is done by hand; there are no fabrication machines. Slip stitches, single crochet stitches, double crochet stitches, etc. can be used by themselves or combined to create fabrics that range from solid and heavy to lightweight and lacy. Tapestry crochet is done by switching two or

---
more colors back and forth as needed to create images and patterns. Yarns not being crocheted are either carried inside the stitches, dropped and picked up when needed, or run along the back.

Colors may be changed before the stitch is completed or afterwards. A stiff fabric with hidden carried colors results from tight stitches, while loose stitches show the carried colors and allow for more drape. More than one color may be carried; the more yarns carried, the thicker the finished material. Just about any flat or three-dimensional form can be tapestry crocheted. It has the flexibility and portability of crochet, but the finished pieces don’t look crocheted. In fact, they look so much like tapestry weaving, most people think that tapestry crocheted pieces are made on a loom!

Just as tapestry weaving includes a number of technical variations, so does tapestry crochet. The stitch used, the method of moving along the colors not being worked, and where the crochet hook is inserted (under one or both loops — as seen below) all produce distinct results. These different approaches have spawned many new names over the years. When I began publishing patterns in the 1980’s, I chose “tapestry crochet” from a group of established terms used to describe the technique. Today it is also called jacquard crochet, intarsia crochet, mosaic crochet, Fair Isle crochet, colorwork crochet, Bosnian crochet, hard crochet, and mochila. Unfortunately, many of these terms also describe different craft techniques.
The slip stitch was probably the first crochet stitch. Kufi hats are back loop slip stitch tapestry crocheted in the port city of Essaouira, Morocco (see photos below). The additional carried yarn adds visual interest, bulk, and warmth. We’ll probably never know how old this technique is because the perishable hats and wooden hooks did not survive.

Slip stitch tapestry crochet hats were traditionally made by Berber shepherds as they tended their flocks of goats and sheep. Today both men and women crochet hats in Morocco. Women back loop slip stitch tapestry crochet them with small hooks and fine thread, taking two to three days to complete. Men prefer to crochet hats with larger hooks and heavier yarns, taking two to three hours to finish. Prices reflect the cost of materials and time spent.

Tapestry crochet is done with the single crochet stitch in the Americas. I first saw it done in Guatemala in the 1970’s while working as a Peace Corps volunteer with a weaving cooperative. Back then, Maya men tapestry crocheted flat, rectangular shoulder bags for their own use (or for sale) in styles that were unique to their home town. A tapestry crocheted shoulder bag is still an important part their traditional outfit, but the bags became popular tourist items in the 1980’s. So today both men and women tapestry crochet to meet popular demand.

Used for transporting seeds in planting season, and for carrying lunch or dinner, these bags are not only beautifully crafted, but also very functional. Even though most Maya men have now switched to contemporary clothing, they often still wear a regional shoulder bag. Each of the bags pictured below is from a different place.

---

4 Slip stitch tapestry crochet is also called “Bosnian crochet”; For more about Othman and slip stitch tapestry crochet, see Carol Ventura, “The Lesson,” http://www.tapestrycrochet.com/blog/?p=2297, July 20th, 2012.
Maya man from San Juan Atitan, Guatemala, tapestry crocheting a bag; Mam Maya woman crocheting a change purse with bright acrylic yarn to match her tapestry crocheted bag, Maya tapestry crocheted shoulder bags with woven shoulder straps and change purse (photos by Carol Ventura 1984).

In the late 1970’s, most Maya bags were tapestry crocheted with the same commercially spun and dyed cotton thread used for weaving. Several threads were joined and crocheted as one strand. Naturally colored black and white wool was also used and acrylic yarn was just entering the market. By the 1980’s, brightly colored acrylic yarn was the favorite of many weavers and crocheters, as it still is today.

While most bags were crocheted with two colors, seven colors were carried to produce this durable cotton bag in 1978 in Nebaj, Quiche, Guatemala. The shoulder strap was backstrap woven (Carol Ventura collection).

Rectangular looped shoulder bags have a long history in Guatemala, predating crochet. Crochet did not replace looping, but was simply added to the technical repertoire, but I believe it was the loopers who first saw the potential of tapestry crochet and were the first to adapt it to their needs. Both looped and crocheted shoulder bags are similar in proportion and shape and both regularly have a strap affixed to one side that is tied to a loop on the other. looped bags still have their place because they’re hardier and more flexible than tapestry crocheted bags.

---


7 Carol Ventura, More Tapestry Crochet, 2002: 18.
A similar relationship between looping and tapestry crochet can be seen in Columbia, South America, where both cylindrical looped bags (below left) and cylindrical tapestry crocheted bags (below right) are popular.

The internet has really helped spread and influence tapestry crochet. Deep local to pan global can be seen in the work of Marina Gavrilov, who grew up in Russia, but now lives in Canada. She learned how to tapestry crochet from her grandmother many years ago, but didn’t realize its potential until later. Marina is inspired by her Russian heritage and by the Colombian mochila bags seen above. Her pieces combine traditional, art nouveau, and art deco designs.

---

8 For more about Marina and her bags, see Carol Ventura, “Drawn In Bags,” http://www.tapestrycrochet.com/blog/?p=3103, January 27th, 2014; Marina’s online store is https://www.ravelry.com/stores/marina-g-designs and MarinaDesignBoutique on Etsy.
Marina explains, “... tapestry crochet opens up a lot of opportunities for new ideas and creativity. It allows you to self-express, weave your own story, to be unique and yet continue the traditional line of this craft.”

Tapestry crochet is also found in Peru, where bags and hats (pictured below) are made for the tourist trade. Some of the backstrap weavers I met in the highlands knew how to crochet but didn’t know how to carry and switch colors. They caught on right away after seeing how it was done. Like so many others, they are looking for new ways to increase their income. Tapestry crochet requires little investment, the finished products are easy to transport, and product possibilities are endless.⁹

![Image of Peruvian tapestry crocheted bags and hat and backstrap weaver with changing colors](image_url)

A connection between looping and tapestry crochet is also found in the hats of Cameroon, Africa.¹⁰ The man pictured below left wears an acrylic tapestry crocheted hat, while the man on the right wears a looped one made of plant fiber. A variety of hats for sale can be seen hanging on the wall in the background.

![Image of Cameroon tapestry crocheted hats](image_url)

---

Did you ever wonder why used sweaters are so popular in Africa? Well, in Cameroon they’re unraveled and upcycled into hats! The shape, type, colors, and complexity of the designs communicate a number of different messages. Sometimes a hat denotes a social position, other times an ethnic affiliation, and occasionally it’s simply a fashion statement. Special clothing often marks important events. The blue hat with white letters seen on the ground below left commemorates the 2000 Nguon Festival in Foumban, Cameroon. Flat strands of acrylic fibers reclaimed from woven sacks are often carried along with the yarn to stiffen the tapestry crocheted fabric (see below far right). The hat seen below (center right) was tapestry crocheted with acrylic yarn and sack fiber.

Jewish men often wear kippot (skullcaps), some of which are tapestry crocheted. The kippot pictured below are from Israel and Poland.

Originally from Odessa (in the Ukraine) Nina Reiderman and her family moved to Israel in 1995. She explained, “In 2011 I learned about tapestry crochet when I saw pictures of Marina Gavrilov’s bags online (see page 5). I was fascinated by her work. I didn’t know that you could do something that looked like fabric with a crochet hook. I started reading about it on the internet. It looked masterful and difficult, but I thought if someone else can do it, then I’ll do it, too.”[11] “I remembered that kippot (worn by religious men in Israel) were done with the same technique.” The photos below feature some of Nina’s fabulous work.

---

Back loop tapestry crochet is popular in Turkey and the rest of Europe. This method more easily produces a supple fabric. The front loop forms a horizontal line under each row of single crocheted stitches. The tapestry crocheted drawstring purses seen below were inspired by similar ones used in Ottoman times for coins. Crocheted from bottom to top with very fine thread into the back loop, some are half double crocheted, others are double crocheted.

The detail (above right) shows that the other thread was carried only in the rows where it was needed and that 2 threads were carried when necessary. Colors where changed after each stitch was completed, which resulted in the color of the previous stitch landing over the new stitch.

A connection between looping and tapestry crochet can be seen in Finland, where mittens are still made using both techniques. A threaded needle guides a spun fiber in and out of several loops while nålbinding (see next photo). This looping technique has been utilized for thousands of years around the world to produce both heavy and lightweight fabrics. Nalbound Viking (800-1066) mittens, hats, and socks have been found in Danish bogs. It’s possible that tapestry crochet in Scandinavia evolved from nålbinding. With crochet, a hook pulls though a small loop, whereas with nålbinding, the entire yarn needs to be pulled through each loop with a needle; very labor intensive. Even though the yarn is short (more is spun onto it as needed), looping is still very time consuming. Nalbound mittens are warmer and hold up better than tapestry crocheted mittens, though, perhaps the reason both techniques are still used in Finland.

---

Nålbinding (photo by Renata Fossett 2014) and woolen nalbound mittens from the Karin Rosendahl collection, Korsnäs, Finland (photo by Carol Ventura 2005).

Back looped tapestry crocheted drawstring bags were popular gifts at the turn of the 19th century in Finland. Men utilized them on special occasions to carry a number of things, including tobacco and money. These wool bags copied elements of the more expensive silk purses used by the upper classes.15

Tapestry crochet gloves, hats, wristbands, sweaters, and bags are still popular in Korsnäs (a municipality on the Ostrobothnia coast of Finland) where Swedish-speaking people continue many of their traditions. Korsnäs sweaters are a stunning combination of back loop tapestry crochet and knitting. The first Korsnäs sweaters were made in the late 1800’s when crochet became fashionable. Back then, the sweaters were only worn on special occasions.16

15 For more tapestry crocheted bags and information about their history and use, see Marketta Luutonen, Bags of Meaning, Akatiimi Oy, Hamina, Finland, 2002; and Marketta Luutonen, Anna-Maija Bäckman, and Gunnar Bäckman, Decorative Crocheting (Tryckeri Kirjapaino Printing House, Vaasa, Finland, 2003):26.
Beginning on the bottom, the sweaters are crocheted, then knit, then crocheted in rounds for both pullover and open styles. After the border of the sweater has been finished, loops are pulled through the crochet stitches to knit the body of the sweater in rounds, traditionally by more than one person at a time on double pointed needles (see left photo below). The top seam is hand sewn together, the tube is secured with machine-sewn stitches around the arm openings, then the arm holes are cut. The sleeves are crocheted, then knit, then crocheted from the shoulder to the cuff and then sewn onto the sweater. The neck is edged with a crocheted border. The front is cut open for the button-down style, then a decorative edging is added for the button and its holes and to help secure and hide the raw edges. The last step is to hand sew a narrow, knit band over all the cut and sewn seams to camouflage the joins.17

In Finland, yarns are switched back and forth very efficiently by placing them on either side of the left pointer finger, as seen in the photo below (on the right).

Marion Verloop designs and back loop tapestry crochets mochila bags in Holland. Her fabulous patterns have been available online since 2014.\(^8\) It’s very difficult to crochet a circular motif, but no problem for Marion! She shares her talent and crochet passion in the “Mochila Bags, Crochet” Facebook group that includes over 26,000 incredible designers and crocheters from around the world.

Bead crochet is usually done with a single thread. All the beads are carefully loaded onto the thread in the order they will be used. Since tapestry crochet is worked with two or more threads, each thread can be strung with a single bead color. Only the color needed at the time is bead crocheted to form the motif while the other thread is carried. The colored threads contribute both to the pattern and to the substantial fabric that provides structure. This flexible medium offers fantastic design potential since the design isn’t locked in – colors can be changed at any time!\(^9\)

Many 19th century miser purses were bead tapestry crocheted. These change purses have a slit in the middle for inserting money, compartments at each end (one for coins and the other for paper money or coins of a different denomination), and one or two metal rings in the middle to keep the money from slipping out.\(^{20}\) The ends are usually single crocheted in spiral rounds, while the center is often double or triple crocheted in rounds, then back and forth in the middle to form a slit. Tiny beads highlight the floral motifs on the miser purse below. The white beads were strung

---

\(^8\) Marion Verloop’s Ravelry store is at https://www.ravelry.com/designers/marion-verloop.

\(^9\) From Carol Ventura, Bead & Felted Tapestry Crochet, 2006: 11.

onto a contrasting color thread. Since the bead slides to the back of the stitch, the tapestry crocheted fabric looks different than expected because it shows what we would consider to be the reverse side.

Renie Breskin Adams is a contemporary American fiber artist and teacher – a real pioneer in both areas. The construction Cosmic Symmetry (pictured below left with detail) and Square 5, Steps (below right) are amazing! For both pieces, Renie made colorful strips by tapestry crocheting back and forth with two colors, carrying one while working the other. She then sewed the strips together. I'm sure there were many challenges lining up the sections and planning out the colors to create the larger geometric patterns.

When a crocheted piece is turned over at the end of each row, the alternate rows form a ridge and usually show the back of the single crochet stitches, as seen in the detail above and far left in the next photo.

I crocheted the next three samples (in the same photo below) from right to left with my right hand, then from left to right with my left hand to place the face of all stitches on the front. The second one was crocheted tightly and the hook was inserted into only the back loop. The hook

21 For more about Renie B. Adams, please visit her interesting web page www.reniebee.com.
was inserted under both loops on the third sample and it was also crocheted tightly. The largest one was done the same as the third, but with a larger hook and loose stitches.\textsuperscript{22}

\textbf{From L to R:} tapestry crocheted across with tight stitches, then turned over to work the next row from the other side; back loop tapestry crocheted tightly from right to left with the right hand, then from left to right with the left hand; crocheted tightly from right to left with the right hand, then from left to right with the left hand inserting into both top loops; crocheted loosely from right to left with the right hand, then from left to right with the left hand with the hook inserted into both top loops (from Carol Ventura, More Tapestry Crochet, 2002).

Lack of support for the arts inspired my \textit{Art Hysterical Triptych}. The cultures we focus on in art history are those that have supported art. What will our legacy be?

\begin{center}
\textbf{Carol Ventura, Art Hysterical Triptych: Unenlightened Age, Age of Enlightenment, and Priorities and Legacies, linen, each is 9 1/2 x 7 1/2 in (24.13 x 19.05 cm), 1996 (Carol Ventura collection).}
\end{center}

Atlachinocolotl Paquiliztli / Diego Juarez Viveros learned how to crochet from his mother. His exquisite pieces are inspired by his Mexican heritage. They’re crocheted back and forth with the face of the fabric showing only the front of the stitches. He switches hands at the end of each row so that the front of the piece is always facing him. Having the fabric always facing front makes it easier to follow a graph.

![Atlachinocolotl Paquiliztli / Diego Juarez Viveros, Totlahtol Techpatlantiz (Our word will make us fly) by Atlachinocolotl Paquiliztli, 70% acrylic 30% polyester, 2014 (photo courtesy the artist).](image)

With felted tapestry crochet, the pattern is on both sides of the cloth and the carried yarn gives it some weight – making it perfect for purses and hats. The large hook and loose stitches make crocheting fast and easy on the wrists.

Felted tapestry crochet is done with a large hook and loose stitches. Many yarns can be felted, including wool and alpaca. Felting pieces in a washing machine causes them to shrink more horizontally than vertically. The motif is visible on the front and back and the felted fabric is very thick. The bulky yarn and bold motif contribute to the drama and sturdiness of this felted tote from my *Bead & Felted Tapestry Crochet* book.

![Loose stitch for felted tapestry crochet; Carol Ventura, Let’s Face It Tote before felting and after, felted tapestry crochet, wool, from Carol Ventura, Bead & Felted Tapestry Crochet, 2006.](image)

---

What follows the development of bead tapestry crochet and felted tapestry crochet? Bead felted tapestry crochet, of course! Beads highlight the Button Flap Bag pictured below that was bead felted tapestry crocheted in one piece – strap and all.

![Button Flap Bag before felting (left) and after felting, bead felted tapestry crochet wool and glass beads, Carol Ventura, Bead & Felted Tapestry Crochet, 2006.](image)

This quick look at tapestry crochet is just the beginning of the story. Variations are found in many places yet to be explored. Workshops, publications, and the internet are spreading the word about this once deep local technique. Please look at https://www.tapestrycrochet.com and the Tapestry Crochet Facebook group at https://www.facebook.com/groups/52613099533/ to see more pan global tapestry crochet in action.

**Bibliography**


