

Do You Have Any Hang-Ups?

With textile art becoming the next big trend, now might be the time to get some. BY BARBARA ANN ROSENBERG

YOU LOVE ORIGINAL PAINTINGS BY Rembrandt or Picasso or van Gogh, but don't have a Rockefeller or an Annenberg in your family tree to will you one. You're bored with prints — even the good, signed ones that are supposed to keep going up in value. And you've outgrown the bright, wonderful posters that used to hang in your college dorm.

Still, you need something for that big blank wall in the room you're decorating — or, at least, *thinking* about decorating. Something that will *make* the room; impress everyone who sees it. All right, get real — what *can* you hang there?

Well, it's not all that difficult, actually. In keeping with one of the hottest interior design trends, you might want to try hanging something in the textile line — like a brilliantly colored original weaving from some exotic, faraway place such as Peru or Bolivia or Guatemala or India. Or maybe a sophisticated Navajo rug, loomed right here in the U.S.A. (or one of the copies made in another country). Or a Chinese or Japanese embroidery. Maybe even an Amish quilt. The possibilities are endless, limited only by your imagination and your color scheme (if that's a consideration). And most of them are eminently affordable.

"There's a lot of wonderful stuff out there — things that look absolutely gorgeous on a wall — that you can buy without breaking the bank," says Lucy Fowler Williams. Williams should know. She's enough of an expert in textiles to be keeper of the

Native American Collection at the University of Pennsylvania's Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology.

Williams doesn't place any particular restrictions on potential buyers, such as, "Buy only the best examples," or, "Buy only those things with historical significance." On the contrary, she's enthusiastic and encouraging in her advice. "There's something in every price range — but don't only think about the monetary aspect of a piece. Go for what you love."

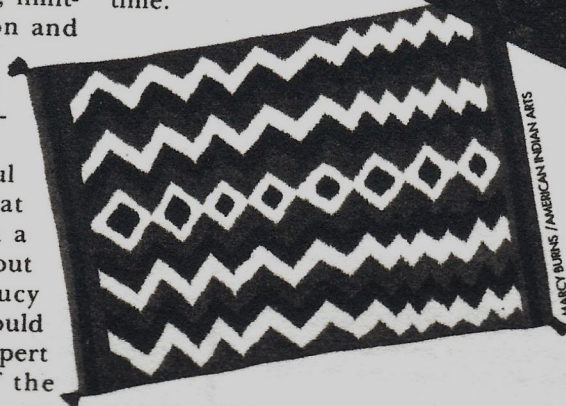
Williams does offer some words of caution for people to consider before buying any piece of woven or stitched art. "Look for a combination of workmanship and materials, as well as an eye for design," she advises. Then, almost as an aside, she notes that if you are interested in old textiles, you might want to consider getting historical documentation — that's what her museum does — "to help discover what a piece can tell us about a certain people at a certain time."



MARYANNE CONHEW / TEXTILE ART PHILADELPHIA



QUILTWORKS AT THE ARTWORKS AT DONKEYS



MARCY BURNS / AMERICAN INDIAN ARTS

ARTFUL DECOR: Mid-20th-century Zemmour Saddle rug from Morocco (top); "Summer in Iowa" contemporary quilt pattern by Elaine Seaman (center); Navajo Germantown Eyedazzler blanket, circa 1880 (bottom).

HOME

According to Maryanne Conheim, who deals in textiles (and other forms of folk art) on Pine Street in Center City Philadelphia (215-893-9960), there's a "long, honorable tradition" of hanging textiles and rugs and quilts and other things on the walls (and even windows) of a home. "It keeps the house warm, physically as well as aesthetically," she says, pointing out that warming the cold, stone walls of medieval houses was the primary reason for weaving the huge, exquisitely fine tapestries that now hang in so many European museums.

Far away from these tapestries in

spirit and style, but with much the same purpose in mind, are a number of Lancaster County residents who make quilts specifically for their walls (as well as their beds and cribs). Rebecca Dienner and her daughter, Lucy Beiler, both New Order Amish (which means they wear white caps and dress "plain," but they own automobiles and have telephones), are very productive at it. They sell them, too, out of Beiler's house in Gordonville (about one-and-a-half miles from Intercourse). Working together at the quilting (and, occasionally appliquéing), they make about 20 wall hangings a year in various patterns, with the heart-shaped, grandmother's fan and lone star being the most popular. But that's not all —

not by a long shot. During that same period, they might also make as many as 20 crib quilts, also in assorted patterns, such as the log cabin and wedding ring. People sometimes hang these miniature quilts on their walls, too.

Somewhere the Dienner and Beiler women must have heard that idle hands have time for the devil's work, because theirs are surely never idle. They are forever piecing and quilting, quilting and piecing — an art that Beiler learned from her mother, who, of course, learned it from *her* mother, and back it goes. Incidentally, in addition to the wall hangings and crib quilts, they turn out a number of double and queen-sized bed quilts, too, which are frequently in colors chosen by their clients to match or complement their bedroom scheme. But they usually make quilts in random colors — just like in the old days, when people used whatever scraps they had left over from other sewing and pieced them together to make decorative effects. (Their hand-quilted wall hangings and crib quilts are \$99 each — more if they're appliquéd. Large quilts, such as those for a full or queen-sized bed, are a little difficult to hang, except on a huge wall; they start at \$395 and move up rather gently in price for the more complicated patterns. The women can be reached at 717-768-3106.)

Antique Amish quilts are heavily collected, and there are dealers who specialize in them. M. Finkel and Daughter at 936 Pine St. (215-627-7797) were among the pioneers in this activity, and their shop is never without a prime example hanging in the window. Even the ones that are too fragile to take the everyday wear-and-tear of bed-making look lovely on the wall.

Lancaster County is not only a center for Amish quilts. One large dealer there is well-known for his large stock of Oriental rugs — to hang as well as to walk on. "We have everything from inexpensive wool dhurries to fine silk Persians, woven with more than 600 knots to the inch," says Mark Blackburn, president of Wholesale Rug in Lancaster (800-346-RUGS). "And at prices for everyone — from \$20 to \$1,500 for 3-by-5-foot pieces. Beautiful for wall hangings."

The Zapotec Indians in Oaxaca, Mexico, are master weavers, as well

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they should be, having practiced the art for many hundreds of years. And Blackburn says that, in response to requests from several of his clients across the country, he commissions them to make American Indian rugs in traditional Navajo patterns, using authentic vegetal dyes, just as weavers did until about 70 years ago when aniline dyes came into existence. "People are using a lot of Navajo patterns on their walls to achieve the Southwestern look that's so popular," he says. A 4-by-6-foot rug sells for \$175.

Marcy Burns, owner of American Indian Arts in Glenside (215-576-1559), has been involved with the Southwestern look Blackburn refers to for the past 21 years. "I went to Scottsdale, Ariz., on my honeymoon — and fell in love," she says. Burns' heartthrob (in addition to her husband) turned out to be antique Indian artifacts — first baskets, then textiles. She concurs with Blackburn about there being a real surge of interest in Indian textiles — most of which have been woven by the Navajo tribe. "The Navajos learned weaving from the Pueblo Indians, and they went on to develop it into an art form," she says. "The Navajo textiles are like paintings on a wall — they're that interesting."

Burns points out that there are two distinct markets in the Navajo textiles — antique and modern — and both have risen steadily in price and value. In fact, she says, the highest price ever paid for a textile at auction was for an early Navajo blanket, sold recently for \$50,000. But for people not interested (or willing, or even able) to pay anywhere near that, there are good pieces starting at \$300 or \$400.

ONCE PEOPLE HAVE SELECTED A wonderful piece of textile art for their wall, they're often confounded about what to *do* with it — how to frame, mount or even maintain it. That doesn't present a real problem, however, thanks to *Textiles as Art*, a book written by Chicago-based expert Laurence Korwin. The book is explicit on every score — the colorfully illustrated text covers selecting, mounting and even positioning textiles on a wall for maximum effect.

Korwin goes beyond the more typical fabrics or rugs when he writes about using textiles as wall

art. He points to "richly detailed Japanese kimonos," which can be mounted in a box. "Quite dramatic," is how he describes the effect. Or, if people wonder what to do with a Bolivian poncho they brought back from their travels, Korwin suggests they "frame it up and it can be very effective — everything doesn't have to be museum-quality to make a splash on the wall."

Korwin does not denigrate the idea of using museum-quality textiles on the wall. On the contrary, he sells many of them (such as \$3,000 Indonesian ikats — weavings that are made with pre-dyed thread) along with other, more mundane items, some even worn and frayed. But he takes particular pride in a contemporary Amish

child's quilt that he has for sale in his Chicago shop, citing it as "a way to achieve drama with imagination."

SO RUMMAGE AROUND. LOOK AT THE stuff you've inherited or brought back from some trip. Maybe there's a piece of fabric or a rug or embroidered garment or some weaving that you've overlooked. Even if that's not the case and you have to go out and buy a wonderful textile, listen to the experts. They say that it's possible to buy a museum-quality textile for the price of a third-rate painting. Just hang it on an empty wall, sit back and wait for the compliments. ■

Barbara Ann Rosenberg is a regular contributor to this magazine.