

Mary DeLano

A fiber artist's journey

BY LINDA RAE COUGHLIN

Mary DeLano's fiber arts journey began in earnest almost 10 years ago when she took several classes at Pleasant Mountain Fiber Arts in Denmark, Maine, an annual weekend of fiber workshops. That week Rose Ann Hunter, a rug maker/historian who lives in Newburyport, Massachusetts, taught a workshop on how to make a standing wool rug. Mary was so new to this craft that she hadn't even discovered wool fabric (other than in recycled clothing), so she thought the students would be working with felted wool sweaters in the workshop. Much to her delight, she discovered the world of wool fabric, with all of its wonderful hand-dyed variations.

Mary loved the standing wool technique immediately, but thought that the coaster she had made in the workshop looked too crude, partly because she had cut all of her wool strips by hand. That night, she pulled the coaster apart, re-cut the wool with a rotary cutter, and sewed them back together. Proudly she took her piece back to show Rose Ann the next day, and a new friendship was formed.

Mary decided her next piece would be a long, rainbow-colored runner for her hall. She collected wool clothing from thrift stores and frequented Craigslist. Next, she purchased a cutter, as rotary cutting was too slow for a large runner. DeLano discovered that most cutters used by rug hookers "didn't produce wide enough strips and didn't give me flexibility on the width of the strip I cut, unless I wanted to spend lots of money on different sized blades." She discovered a cutter used by rug braiders, which was produced by Ribgy Precision Products in Bridgton, Maine, just 20 minutes from where she lives. This sturdy cutter, which allows Mary to vary the width of her strips from ½" to 2", is a real workhorse, and she is still using the original blade almost ten years later.

Craigslist turned out to be a valuable resource for recycled wool at affordable prices. Lots of hookers and braiders live in Maine, and frequently a family member is getting rid of a hooker's stash. Standing wool rugs can incorporate a wide variety of wool weaves and weights.

Since Mary wasn't picky about the weight of the wool or the condition it was in, she built a large wool stash pretty affordably. And, being an inveterate recycler, Mary was thrilled with her new hobby of wool gathering (as a friend later told Mary's husband: "There are really two hobbies involved, one is rug making, the other is wool gathering.")

Mary wanted many shades of wool in her rugs; she discovered "crock pot" dyeing and was soon using heat and a splash of ammonia to leach the color out of strongly dyed wool into neutral plaids and solids. Since yellow wool is really hard to find, Mary taught herself to dye with a few packets of Cushing dye, also a Maine product.

The *Rainbow Runner* took Mary several years to make and is her favorite piece. Mary notes, "In its early stages, the rug was quite portable. I'd simply cut a bag of strips, add some cotton crochet thread and a five-inch needle, and I could sew "flowers" wherever my travels took me. Once I had a large collection of flowers of one color, I'd fit them together and sew them in place with a curved needle, paying careful attention to color blending when I transitioned from one color to another. As I finished each color, I was excited to start the next. Eventually I sewed all the sections together and added a border."

Rose Ann Hunter was the inspiration for her border. As the rug grew, so did their friendship, and they would sit around the immense dining room table in Rose Ann's



Rainbow Runner, 28" x 11'2", new and recycled wool fabric and cotton crochet thread. Designed and constructed by Mary DeLano, Norway, Maine, 2011. ALICE SEEGER

historic Federalist home and experiment with new techniques. Rose Ann suggested that Mary might want to soften the black border on the rug by center shirring black wool with the corresponding color in the rug, creating a gentler transition. Rose Ann's idea created the perfect border for *Rainbow Runner*.

While making *Rainbow Runner*, Mary made lots of smaller pieces, ranging in size from coasters to trivets to chair pads. All of these pieces were double sided. Mary writes, "This feature of standing wool is both its beauty and its challenge. Because the rug is sewn to

HINTS FROM MARY

- Needles: Mary has found the Piecemaker's 5¹/₈" Dollmaking Needles are an excellence choice.
- Crochet thread: size 10. Mary usually doubles the thread when stringing beads or shirring pieces but uses a single strand to sew the beads and shirring together.
- Finding the proper tension is the key to making a satisfying piece. If you roll your beads or gather your shirring too tightly, the piece will become stiff, and it will be hard to push your needle through. But if you roll your beads or gather your shirring too loosely, the piece will be sloppy and floppy. The same goes for sewing your pieces together: too tight and the piece will cup; too loose and it will not be even.



Detail of **Rainbow Runner**.

itself, rather than a background, it can be flipped over. Because it isn't sewn to background, however, it is harder to create patterns."

Mary started another large piece (still unfinished), which translates the "pennies" from traditional penny rugs into standing wool. For this piece, she experimented with creating a larger field of background color. She created a thick, center shirred border around each penny that is the same color as the background, and then filled the spaces between the bordered pennies with beads made of the background fabric and little pops of the colors found in the pennies.

In 2015, Mary started a caterpillar shirred rug that was inspired by traditional three-circle braided rugs. Mary writes, "While most shirred rugs are sewn to a backing, I was fairly confident that the geometric shape

READERS' GALLERY



Orange Chair Pad, 14" diameter. Recycled wool fabric, cotton crochet thread. Designed and constructed by Mary DeLano, Norway, Maine, 2010. ALICE SEEGER

would allow me to skip the backing and produce a two-sided rug."

Next, Mary made "postage stamp" pieces, a technique that is described in Diana Blake Gray's book *Traditional Shirred and Standing Wool Rugs*. Mary notes; "I made two pieces – a chair pad with ½" squares and an oval runner with 1" squares. The squares are hand cut, don't need to be precisely sized, and are a great way to use up small scraps of wool that I can't bear to throw out. These pieces satisfied my need to use up scraps, no matter how small, and created a texture that is pleasing to both the eye and under foot."

After reading Tracy Jamar's article in *Rug Hooking* magazine on shirred rugs (September/October 2015), Mary struggled to teach herself the bias shirred technique that Tracy described. DeLano writes, "Since I longed to move beyond the geometric pieces I had been making into representational pieces, I was thrilled to find Tracy teaching a class at Sauder Village in 2016. With her help, I created *Bird and Tree*, which



Caterpillar Rug, 64" x 26", recycled wool fabric and cotton crochet thread. Designed and constructed by Mary DeLano, Norway, Maine, 2016. ALICE SEEGER



Detail of **Caterpillar Rug**.



Bias Shirred Footstool, 13" x 16", recycled wool fabric, cotton crochet thread and cotton duck backing. Designed and constructed by Mary DeLano, Norway, Maine, 2016. ALICE SEEGER



Postage Stamp Chair Pad, 14" diameter, recycled wool fabric and cotton crochet thread. Designed and constructed by Mary DeLano, Norway, Maine, 2016. ALICE SEEGER

incorporates standing wool beads, bias shirring (in the trunk of the tree), patch shirring (leaves), caterpillar shirring (sky and ground), hooking (ground), and knit pieces (ground). For the first time my rug was sewn to a background, and I delighted in combining all of these wonderful techniques into my first representational piece."

Her next challenge was to create a representational piece in standing wool without sewing it to a background. *Flower Mat* was designed to be a chair pad but outgrew its chair. According to Mary, "I find it much more difficult to create a representational piece when I am not sewing it to, or hooking it through, a background. I was pleased to make fairly balanced flower shapes and a reasonably



Detail of Postage Stamp Chair Pad.

READERS' GALLERY



Postage Stamp Rug, 44" x 18", recycled wool fabric and cotton crochet thread. Designed and constructed by Mary DeLano, Norway, Maine, 2016. ALICE SEEGER



Flower Mat, 17" diameter, recycled wool fabric, yarn (unknown content) and cotton crochet thread. Designed and constructed by Mary DeLano, Norway, Maine, 2017. ALICE SEEGER

round circle. My next project will be a real adventure: I am planning to sew a two-sided rug with a large tree and a giraffe—that rug will present lots of challenges."

Mary's art is influenced by other textile arts and artists. She has studied with the Gee's Bend quilters, folk art quilter Sue Spargo, and eco printer Amelia Poole. She has experimented with translating quilt patterns into standing wool and has created a few reproductions of log cabin squares. In 2015, Mary studied quilt making with the women of Gee's Bend. Their work inspired her to start a caterpillar shirred

rug that echoes one of their corduroy quilts; a knit rug that incorporates skewed log cabin blocks; and two stool tops, one done in wool yarn with the tambour technique and one bias shirred in roughly the same pattern. Mary's copy of *Gee's Bend: The Women and Their Quilts*, a book that was produced in conjunction with the exhibition of quilts at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Texas, is marked with notations on many other quilts she would like to translate into rugs.

Mary DeLano is a multi-lingual fiber artist who loves color, texture, and recycling. The standing wool and the other historical sewn rug techniques Mary incorporates into her pieces are a delight for her to teach to others. Mary writes, "Wool can be manipulated in so many different ways, making interesting shapes and textures. My only regret is that it takes so long to create each piece that I will never be able to sew all of the pieces I design." Mary can be reached at mdelano@maine.rr.com. RHM



Shirred Bird and Tree, 19" x 13", recycled wool fabric, yarn (unknown content) and cotton crochet thread.
 Designed and constructed by Mary DeLano, Norway, Maine, 2017. ALICE SEEGER



Detail of **Penny Rug**. ALICE SEEGER



Penny Rug, unfinished, recycled wool fabric and cotton crochet thread. Designed and constructed by Mary DeLano, Norway, Maine. ALICE SEEGER

Linda Rae Coughlin resides Warren, New Jersey, and is on the editorial board of RHM. You can learn about her feminist fiber/hooked art at www.theart rugs.com.