

Hooked in the Blue Ridge

Mother and daughter share a collective 50 years of hooking

Mother and daughter Sally Mello and Jeanne Day have the about-as-perfect-as-you-can-find space for creating their hooked rugs and wall hangings. Like most things at Jim and Sally Mello's Oak Shade Farm in the Virginia foothills of the

Blue Ridge Mountains, the studio space is handmade and cozy. Finished rugs and Sally's framed punch-needle scenes adorn the walls. Rugs in process on Sally's rectangular frame and Jeanne's oval frame stand at the ready for whenever the two next meet to work and share news, exchange stories, or listen to Diane Rehm, a radio show host on NPR.



Bluebells, 24" x 45½", hand-cut wool on linen.
Designed and hooked by Sally Mello, Rixeyville, Virginia, 2009.

The studio's sliding-glass doors open to the west—to the fields of Christmas trees that Sally, husband Jim, and their children and grandchildren cut and sell every holiday season and the field in which the family grows strawberries and asparagus and rotates through a variety of veggies to sell through CSA (community-supported agriculture) subscriptions and at local farmers' markets. Beyond that are the often-psychedelic vistas of the mountains that show up in their rugs as blue against pink skies born by the setting sun.

Sally and Jeanne have more than a combined 50 years of rug hooking experience. Both hand cut wide strips of wool they fold over as they hook. They glean the wool from thrift stores, yard sales, and hospital auxiliary shops. Only once has Sally dyed some greens for a particular rug. Otherwise, they use what they find—as-is.



Joe Pye Weed, 24" x 45¹/₂", hand-cut wool on linen. Designed and hooked by Sally Mello, Rixeyville, Virginia, 1999.

Creation of a Pattern

Sally and Jeanne's artful relationship is older than their combined years of rug hooking. Living in Fairfax City in the 1960s, Sally Mello kept her easel in her kitchen, between the sink and stove. While husband Jim worked as a paleontologist at the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History, she tended the house and four children, including Jeanne, the only girl and the oldest. The placement of that easel indicated to the family how important art was for Sally, who graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design.

Sally painted oils and also did woodcut prints. Once she got a studio, work flow improved. In one year, she did 70 paintings. And she got Jeanne involved.

"I used to call her in to ask her what she thought of something I'd painted," Sally says.

"She'd already started teaching me about design," Jeanne adds.

One time when Jeanne was in grade school, Sally asked her about a picture she was working on. "It looks like two pictures to me," Jeanne told her mother.

"The bottom was clear" and could stand on its own, says Jeanne. "She made it into two [pictures]. She appreciated what I said."

That exchange was important to both mother and daughter and would set the pattern for years to come.

Despite the greater ease of work a dedicated space provided, Sally still needed a medium that she could pick up and put down. "Oil doesn't wait," she says.

So, she turned to hooking—something she was familiar with growing up in Rhode Island.

"With rug hooking, it can be in your daily workspace—and it doesn't smell bad," Jeanne says.

Jeanne's serendipitous foray into rug hooking came when Sally picked up an oval frame at a yard sale.



Fire Story, 22" x 44", wool blend fabrics hooked through burlap. Designed and hooked by Jeanne M. Day, Rixeyville, Virginia, 2010.



Heron, 22" x 44", hand-cut wool on linen.
Designed and hooked by Jeanne M. Day, Rixeyville, Virginia, 2013.

That was 1994.

"When she brought home the oval frame, I just gravitated to it," says Jeanne. "It's just the space I can get ideas into."

Adds Sally: "It's like what artists do with a shape when they hold it up to the landscape and get ideas."

Jeanne liked that the frame was heavy enough to accommodate large rugs with hand-cut strips. Because she had been watching her mother for years, she knew what to do. She needed only a little instruction—how to get the loops at the right height and how to properly make a turn.

Their gentle way of critiquing transferred to the medium of rug hooking.

"One might say, 'Something's wrong with this,'" Sally says.

And the other might observe something and ask a question, adds Jeanne: "Your tree is leaning. Did you want it that way?"

"It's just something we've always done for each other," Sally says.

"Just being able to identify what bothers you about something—that's a big part of the creation," says Jeanne.

Family Hobby-Family Business

In 1979, the Mellos found and bought the place in Rixeyville and planted white pines and Norway spruce. Seven years later, they sold their first Christmas tree. By their tenth year in business, they opened a greenhouse and set up a table with hot apple cider and holiday treats. There, they sell honey, beeswax candles, jams, son Frank's blacksmithed sculptures, husband Jim's weavings, wreaths and roping, and cards, many of which sport photos of the rugs they've hooked.

Notably absent are the rugs themselves. Visitors who want to see those cross the driveway and go to the studio.

Over the years, Sally and Jeanne have developed a cadre of admirers who want to know what they're working on. I am



Lilac Power, 24" x 31", hand-cut wool on linen. Designed and hooked by Sally Mello, Rixeyville, Virginia, 2006.



Sarah's Laugh, 22" x 44", hand-cut wool on linen. Designed and hooked by Jeanne M. Day, Rixeyville, Virginia, 2014. The title of this piece refers to the moment that Abraham's wife, Sarah, understood from God that she was to have a child, after years of not being able to conceive.

TIPS FROM SALLY MELLO & JEANNE DAY

- **Keep an ideas basket.** Cut out pictures of things that inspire you or colors you see that work especially well together. Save these for when ideas are harder to come by.
- **Be open to say, "What do you think?"** What would green look like here?" Feel free to experiment.
- **Make time for your craft.** Maybe you, too, can create your own "crafternoon" with friends and family.
- **Make a practice of spending time in nature.** The more you get into seeing and identifying, the more you see the next time you go out. And then fool around with drawings of what you see, such as by using colored pencils.
- **Don't worry about coming up with something "different."** Look at the same view, the same subjects as others, and do them differently.

one. I got to know the Mellos through the local farmers' market, and though I no longer live close enough to buy the sweetest strawberries I've ever tasted, I can turn to my own walls to "visit" their work, which includes lilacs that seem to dance in their vase as well as a long rug of swaying Joe Pye weed, both by Sally. A fall sumac by Jeanne is at home in the kitchen. They are similar in that they share simplicity of design. Yet they are different—besides the obvious rectangle versus oval. Sally's are bold, just right for a rug, though I've always preferred them on my walls. And Jeanne's are more subtle, more evocative of a feeling you sense she wants you to experience.

And those differences may be why mother and daughter work so well together. They are perhaps each other's biggest fans.

"I needed to buy back five of her rugs," Sally says. "I didn't want them to leave the farm."

"I have hers in my house, too," says Jeanne with a gentle smile. "It works back and forth here."

Sally and Jeanne have begun to enlarge their circle of admirers. About four years ago, they were part of an art show at the River District Arts building in Sperryville, Virginia, an eastern gateway to Shenandoah National Park. The building used to house an antiques mall and is about 25 miles from the Mellos'. Today, it's home to more than 30 artists and a fresh-Mex restaurant.

Sally and Jeanne show their rugs there and husband-father Jim his weavings. They've also recently joined Etsy. It is through their presence at River District Arts that they also make more people aware of rug-hooking as a medium by offering demonstrations and answering questions.

"Weaving is much easier to talk about," says Jeanne. "They are familiar with the



Sumac, 22" x 44", hand-cut wool on linen.

Designed and hooked by Jeanne M. Day, Rixeyville, Virginia, 2006.

machine, whereas we just have a tool."

If the visitor has a rug their aunt or grandmother made, they sometimes ask how they can repair it. "It reconnects them with the rug, with the medium," says Jeanne. "It brings it back alive for them."

Sally encourages beginners to create their own patterns and both give free lessons if someone's really interested in learning. Both mother and daughter also explain how rug hooking is part of their life on the farm. Indeed, more family members have started to hook and they often all get together for Sunday Crafternoons, where each member of the family brings their particular craft to work on, share, and get critiqued. They follow the crafting with a potluck supper.

That points to one issue that Jeanne says is a challenge for many people who have an interest in an art or craft—making time for it.

Poplars, 24" x 32", hand-cut wool on linen. Designed and hooked by Sally Mello, Rixeyville, Virginia, 2012.



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"Justifying that is hard in people's minds: 'I could be vacuuming' or 'I have to do the laundry.'"

But Sally and Jeanne often use their hooking time to sharpen their minds, so long as they are not struggling too much with any part of a rug.

They like lectures, including on philosophy and mythology, psychology and biology, works by Willa Cather, Toni Morrison, and others—or Science Friday, which is no surprise, given husband Jim's connection with the Smithsonian and son Craig's background as molecular biologist and one of a team that won the Nobel Prize in 2006 for work on RNA interference. Sally commemorated the occasion by creating a graphically pleasing rug, *C. elegans*, the name of the rug and the worm that Craig used in his research.

Sally and Jeanne have given away a

number of hookings, including one made for President Obama and another of a local river, the Hazel, sent to then-Virginia Gov. Mark Warner to urge designation of the river as an "Exceptional State Water," an effort Sally spearheaded.

Drawing Inspiration from a Place

And so it always comes back to the land, which offers Sally and Jeanne an abundance of inspiration. The question is how best to capture what they see and feel in the trees, the light, the roads, and the mountains.

Because they don't dye, they often need to be more creative—or find serendipity in certain colors. Jeanne's sumac rug is like that. Utilizing 14 colors, it shows the branches in the fall as the leaves are turning and the berry heads coming into their own. Jeanne

says she had just the right red to work with in that rug—the part that makes up the berries—and the color formed part of the inspiration.

The challenge is often the design itself—big and bold, so how to set things off and get them to "show up." It not only makes them question what they've seen, but also engage it—how can they translate what they've seen in three dimensions into two dimensions and, for Jeanne, capture the feeling?

"If you're looking at a true mountain sky, how do you make the trees show up?" Jeanne says. "Sometimes you make it light at a lower point and darker at the sky. Think of another way." And consider, "What made it possible for you to see it in the first place?"

The warmth of this late-winter day is perfect for checking beehives, and Jeanne leaves to go help her father examine each one.

Sally is pleased with her daughter's progress.

"It's been so exciting for us to see how she's developed as a sensitive, intuitive artist," she says.

Whether it's a rocking chair on the Mellos' porch, a campfire, a pear tree, or a yucca—all Jeanne's rug designs—it's been about "getting her to trust her vision," Sally adds.

In this way, Sally has passed along a gift to her daughter that she received from her father back in Rhode Island.

"Father kept telling me what a great artist I was," she says. "So I stuck with it. It was not about whether people liked it or not, so long as I liked it." **RHM**

Leigh Glenn adapted a drawing by her eight-year-old niece to create her first hooking in 2002. She is a student of Roslyn Logsdon's and resides in Annapolis, Maryland. This is her first story for RHM.

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