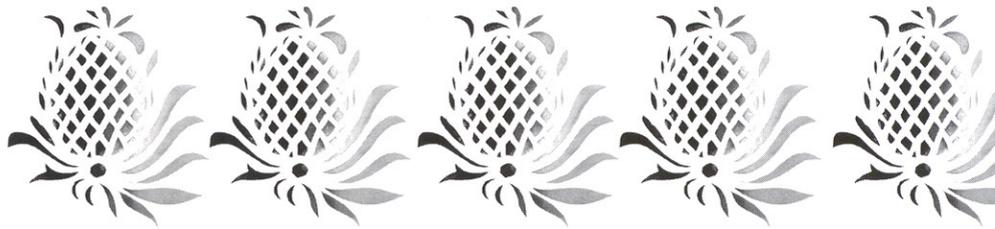


Making Do: The Aesthetics of Frugality

Rebecca L. Lawrence

*Use it up
Wear it out
Make it do
Or do without*



Every girl who grows up in northern New England hears “make it do, or do without” so often that it creates a permanent wrinkle in her brain. This phrase, expressing the essence of Yankee frugality, also captures the aesthetic of the region’s domestic crafts: braided rugs, quilts, stenciling, dried flowers and herbs for winter decorations or sachets, and preserves made from summer harvests.

“Yankees” of my generation (born in the 1940s) who were fortunate enough to grow up in households that allowed frequent contact with their grandmothers had direct experience with the practice of these household traditions. I clearly recall my grandmother ripping old flannel or wool shirts into strips that she twisted into flat braids, then sewed into ovals or circles to cover the cold, winter floors. Many of my great-aunts knitted, crocheted, embroidered, or quilted. Each one became known in the family for the skill in which she excelled.

My grandmother was the best cook among her sisters, and that was the tradition she shared with me: breads, biscuits, shortcakes, pies, puddings, chowders, and stews. As we worked together scooping out butter (in walnut-sized

balls) or shaping scraps of pie dough into little jam turnovers and cinnamon-sugar spirals, she mingled her “receipts,” which were never written down, with family history and recipes to live by. My favorite homily of hers is:

*Be kind to all dumb animals
and give small birds a crumb.
Be kind to human beings, too,
they’re sometimes pretty dumb.*

Today, we buy pie crusts in ready-made circles. There are no scraps to roll into tiny treats, wrapped in words of wisdom.

I thought about these things when I looked into the craft of stenciling, which my mother practiced as I was growing up. Because this craft, along with other New England domestic crafts, has been so commercialized and oversold for “country” decorating schemes, it’s easy to forget its roots and authenticity as it was practiced in rural homes, particularly in the “backwoods” areas of Maine (where I grew up) and New Hampshire. I asked my mother how she learned the technique and her thoughts on whether it was a true tradition or a revival. In her case, she learned how to stencil in the 1930s from someone who was recognized in the community as knowing a lot about it. Why in the 1930s? Because it

Pineapple stencil by Helen Learned of Rumney, New Hampshire.

was Great Depression times, and everyone was looking for different ways of earning a few extra dollars. Practicing crafts at home was one of those ways. My mother and a few of her friends asked the woman to teach them stenciling and decorative painting, which the woman did informally. No money changed hands; “It was about friendship, and she was a nice lady.”

Stenciling techniques, which became less important for wall and floor decorations when the Industrial Revolution brought down the cost of wallpaper and patterned rugs, were kept alive, on a much less grand scale, in other trades such as carriage, furniture, and utensil decoration in the period between 1840 and 1930. My mother told me that the woman she learned from taught “old techniques” and that some of her stencils were made from the shellacked brown paper used by Moses Eaton and other itinerant stencil painters from the 1780s to the 1840s. My mother cut her own stencils from architect’s linen used for blueprints of the day. During this time an acquaintance of hers found a

box of original Eaton stencils in her attic. Her friend shared Eaton's designs with the group.

Moses Eaton moved to Hancock, New Hampshire, from Needham, Massachusetts, in the 1780s. His son, Moses Jr., apprenticed with him, and they both practiced their craft in northern New England. The Eaton descendants, who still live in New Hampshire, do not carry on the family stenciling tradition. These days, stenciling-made-easy kits are a hobby-shop staple: the craft as occupation has outlived its purpose and place in the community. Even so, there are many examples of the Eatons' original work in New Hampshire, and stenciled walls have become a universally recognized symbol of a "New England" aesthetic.

Other New England crafts continue

with more vitality, particularly those that have been passed down as family traditions. The idea of turning food scraps into a savory stew or red flannel hash parallels the aesthetic of turning scraps of cloth into a colorful quilt, or braiding worn-out family clothing into a rug. It extends to the notion of finding uses for things that others would discard. Fading flowers, properly dried, turn into wreaths of summer sun to warm homes through the winter's dark days. Brown ash wood to a carpenter has little use, but to a basket maker like Newt Washburn of Bethlehem, New Hampshire, working in his Sweetser family tradition, split brown ash wood turns into baskets for eggs, laundry, berry-picking, and a host of other uses. An old chair with a sagging, ripped bottom doesn't get thrown away. Chair reseaters like Peter Blanchard of

Concord, who keeps up his family business, weave the seat again and again. The concept all these crafts have in common is the transformation of trash into treasure.

In New Hampshire, self-sufficient cottage industries like these were the impetus for the League of New Hampshire Craftsmen to form during the Great Depression. As early as the mid-1920s, a few enlightened folks (the Coolidges in Center Sandwich and A. Cooper Ballantine in Wolfeboro) saw the earning potential of isolated farming people with traditional craft skills banding together to expand the market for what they made. They also saw the importance of the master-apprentice system as a way of passing these skills on. They convinced Governor John Winant to provide seed money from the state to create a



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Commission on Arts and Crafts in 1931. The commission's report to the governor advocated supporting the highest aesthetic standard for New Hampshire crafts; providing gainful work through home industries, native crafts, and arts; and offering instruction in arts and crafts.

In 1932, the commission became the League of New Hampshire Craftsmen. In the early days, the league was a totally grassroots organization, encouraging the use of local materials like river clay, forming local craft guilds such as the Saffron and Indigo Society, and seeking out old-timers to instruct others in their craft traditions. In 1934 the league organized the first craft fair in the nation at Crawford Notch in the White Mountains. Along with a sales area, the fair had demonstrations of pottery, weaving,

vegetable-dyeing, basket-making, woodcarving, and ironworking. Also featured were the singing of old tunes and country dancing.

The league fair, now held each August at Mount Sunapee State Park, has grown to hundreds of booths. Nearly 50,000 people come to see exhibits, demonstrations, and performances as well as to shop. The inventory has expanded to include less functional, more contemporary crafts; but there is still a core selection of traditional New England crafts — mustards, jellies, ironwork, braided and hooked rugs, clay bowls, quilts, dried flower wreaths, woodcarvings, and more. These crafts tell the story of the league's origins and help carry on family traditions in New Hampshire's craft occupations.

A feature of recent league fairs is a

“next generation” booth, where the children of league members sell their own crafts, often made from the scraps left over from their parents' work. “Making do” is one aesthetic that remains a thoroughly New Hampshire tradition.

Suggested Reading

Steele, Betty. 1982. *The League of New Hampshire Craftsmen's First Fifty Years*. Concord, N.H.

Rebecca Lawrence is the director of the New Hampshire State Council on the Arts in Concord. She has lived in New Hampshire since 1987, but her Yankee roots date back to the mid-1600s, when her ancestors were pioneers on Sabattus Mountain, Maine.



Above: League of New Hampshire Craftsmen display at the 1939 Durham Fair.

Photo courtesy League of New Hampshire Craftsmen

Left: Gardeners Sandi and Wayne Yacek of Milan have created a home business out of the traditional skills of making ornamental wreaths, swags, and other arrangements from dried materials. Combined in a variety of shades and textures, they bring color and fragrance to the house during the long winter months in New Hampshire. *Photo by Lynn Martin*