Rugmaking

The production of braided rugs was one of the first activities undertaken by the project since cutting and tearing cloth, braiding, and sewing strips together were very simple tasks. The finished rugs were ordered by the county for distribution to relief clients and by the WPA nursery schools for floor mats for the children. When requests were received from public institutions for large rugs, workers were transferred to a new unit and taught to make hooked rugs. To keep costs low, these rugs used scrap wool cloth from factories making uniforms for the armed forces.
Melveda Streeter (Burns) organized and directed the hooked rug unit. She was the designer of a line of attractive standard sized rugs.
The rug unit progressed from making small floor mats for kindergarten and nursery schools to producing large rugs for the Milwaukee Public Library, the University of Wisconsin, and other public institutions.
The pattern and colors used in hooked rugs were selected to meet the specific needs of the patron. Hooked rugs usually came in a combination of three to four colors, with one color predominating.
Sample rug designs from the project ordering catalog
Recycled waste wool was bleached and dyed to produce beautiful patterns like this “Fish” rug designed by Ann Krasnan. According to project art director Mary June Kellogg (Rice), “No matter how inexpensive the material used, the article will be well-designed or not made.”.
Rug designs were drawn on the foundation cloth stretched tightly on a frame. The dyed material, cut and roiled in balls, was hooked through the cloth with a small hand tool.
After the project’s furniture unit began furnishing public rooms, very large hooked rugs were made lacing maximum size sections together. Several men were employed to handle the large frames. They also did some of the hooking. Elisabeth Danielson, a woman of boundless energy, supervised the work.
See Mary Kellogg Rice, *Useful Work for Unskilled Women: A Unique Milwaukee WPA Project* (Milwaukee County Historical Society, 2003) for references and photo credits.