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TAPESTRIES IN WOOL AND STONE

BY CLIFFORD WOOD



Photography by Kindra Clineff

It's so curious that the stages of civilization are so often marked by the invention of axes and armaments—never the needle. That old anthropocentrism, I suppose. From sewing pieces of hide together to adding decorative stitches and beads was probably a very short but important step. I suppose that's why needle-workers like pillows. Such a basic human need, to prop up an aching neck or a tired back. But why not make the prop as beautiful as possible? This pillow is a William Morris design.

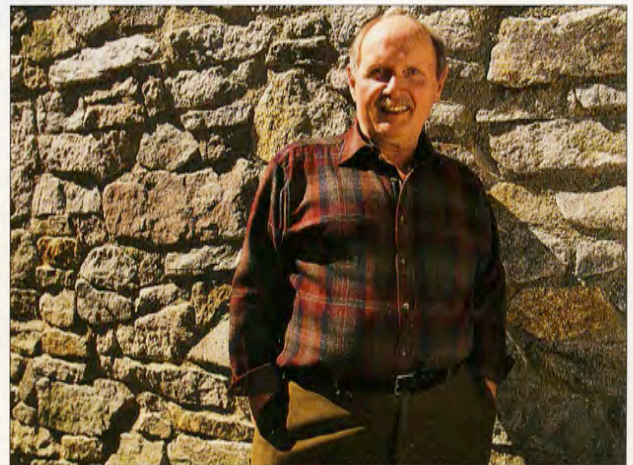


I sometimes fancy myself like Frost's apple-picker, imagining his immortality as just more of the same, but done under ideal conditions. Only, I'd be building a wall, and I'd have beautiful stones, tons of them, every one with at least two flat faces, always splitting exactly where my sledge intends them to split. Or I might end up like the characters in Paul Auster's *The Music of Chance*, consigned to building a wall for no purpose at all. I would know what to expect each day, finish each day with a sense of accomplishment, and retire to my bed with that sweet fatigue of honest labor. Considering my other prospects, I guess that wouldn't be so bad. This pillow is taken from an Arts and Crafts tile.



There aren't many rules to wall building, and they all are apt metaphors for other life skills. Lay a good foundation—almost as many stones underground as above. Get good stones or otherwise work the best with what you have. Others will know. Wall-builders sometimes look at another's work and think, "Any damned fool could build a wall with those stones." Always have more stones than you'll use. Maximize your choices. As I tell my student teachers, "Go in there with more information than you'll ever need. Teach from a richness of resources."

I never saw any contradiction in building walls and working a needlepoint canvas. Both are about creating textures. Both the stones and the yarn are wonderful on their own, but when they're put in place and the light plays off them, that's what excites. My mother seemed to be never without a needle in her hand, knitting, openwork embroidery, needle-pointing, hooking and braiding rugs, dressmaking. I remember as a boy of ten or eleven watching her cut a dress from a pattern, and she stopped—this woman of incredible strength and independence—and said, "I'll never be the seamstress my mother was; she could just look at a woman she was making a dress for and start cutting. She never needed a pattern." It never occurred to me that a fifty-year-old woman would still crave her mother's approval. Life lesson. My father was a farmer who lived very close to the soil, an incredibly hard-working man. My brother and I would help him clear the fields in spring of stones driven up by the frost heaves. "The fields grow stones," he'd say. Some of those walls we still can see in the middle of our New England woods were built, I suspect, as much to get rid of stones as to wall anything in or out. Knowing that doesn't take away from the wall, does it?



Clifford Wood is Professor of English.