

# IMAGE AWARENESS

ARTFUL MAT MAKING AND RUG HOOKING AS THERAPY

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY GWEN DIXON



**Pick a Flower.** *Designed and hooked by Gwen Dixon.*

**T**he fiber arts have long been recognized as having therapeutic benefits related to their tactile qualities, the repetition of movements, and their social benefits. They have also been used to explore powerful metaphors and stories. But can rug hooking be considered “therapeutic”? Can observing your personal process of making mats and giving them meaning be a form of self therapy? For me, and I imagine for many of you, the answer is yes.



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“What art offers is space—  
a certain breathing room for the spirit.”

—John Updike



**Plan B.** Designed and hooked by Gwen Dixon.

In *The Art Therapy Sourcebook* (2007), licensed art therapist and clinical counselor Cathy Malchiodi explains that the art-making process itself can create a physiological response of relaxation, an altering of mood, and even a form of meditation through the repetitive self-soothing qualities of the process and the materials. For rug hookers, this can be because of the feel of the wool as it moves through our hands, the slight tension on the hook needed to pull the wool through the backing, and in the visual effects created by the wool.

In addition to the in-the-moment benefits of art making, Malchiodi explains that the therapeutic benefits also include increased understanding of self, especially from expressing oneself imaginatively, authentically, and spontaneously. And because rug hooking provides an opportunity for a permanent record of meanings, experiences, and feelings, your mats can be looked at later to see not only improvements in technique and innovation, but also changes in your patterns of thoughts and feelings, and your life.

My hooked mat *Plan B* was made when my parents were moving from their home of 50-plus years to an apartment.

What had been a stable and familiar situation was changing to one that called for more flexibility and was somewhat unpredictable. Their experience, and mine, was one of moving from familiar, organized, and well-planned living to swirling bits of unknown and loosely defined shapes. Even now, four or five years later, I still remember those swirling feelings, but I also picture my parents being safe and sound, living in their little apartment.

### THE IMAGES YOU CHOOSE

Is there more that art therapy can offer to rug hookers? And are there even more therapeutic benefits of rug hooking? Yes, in terms of image awareness—that is, becoming aware of the images you choose to have around you and how you respond to them. These are indicators of what is important to you and what has meaning or personal value, according to Malchiodi.

Many artists depict the same subjects, motifs, or images over and over again, and the same is true in rug hooking. It is through the exploration of an image or theme, especially when it is created through our own eyes, that we become aware of the meaning of that image or theme.

**Baby Bird**, one of my nest mats. Designed and hooked by Gwen Dixon.



We are attracted to colors, shapes, forms, and patterns, as well as individual objects, and this is often reflected in our lives, especially in our homes. I love the ideas and meanings of “home”; I am a homebody, and this can be seen in the images I use.



Part of my nest collection.

In her book, Malchiodi offers a series of questions and suggestions to identify images that might be important to you:

- Where do you spend most of your time when at home? Make a list of the images in this space. Look at the colors, shapes, images, collections, and textures.
- Choose a few that really speak to you, or that catch your eye, maybe the ones that you tend to look at a lot. Write a few words or phrases about each one, whatever comes to mind, including how you feel when you look at it.
- Are there some images or shapes that you would like to have more of? Are there some that you don't have that you would really like to have in this room?
- Pick one object or image and look at it for a few minutes. How could you use this item or form in your mat making? Would you change it—give it a different location or background? Would you group other objects with it? What color would you like it to be?



*Sadie, in one of Lucy's first mats, now hanging in Lucy's kitchen, not far from where Sadie used to chase the squirrels. Designed and hooked by Lucy Richard.*

## LUCY AND SADIE

For some fiber artists, pets evoke the feelings that they want to have in their home. I first met Lucy Richard of the Woolly Mason Jar about seven years ago, when I took wool-dyeing lessons with her. At Lucy's home, I met four other rug hookers, as well as Lucy's dog, Sadie. On subsequent visits, I had seen two of Lucy's mats that featured Sadie. I love animals passionately, and as much as I adore them, my pets seldom make it into my work. Why did Lucy hook mats featuring Sadie?



*Lucy's dog, Sadie.*



*Sadie, hanging in Lucy's entryway, engaged in one of her favorite ways of greeting others. Designed and hooked by Lucy Richard.*



*A needle-felted version of Sadie with her bandana, dog collar, and license. Made by Katie, Lucy's daughter, as a Christmas present for Lucy.*

Recently, I asked Lucy to tell me about Sadie. "Sadie changed my life. I had never had a dog before," Lucy said, describing how she had seen Sadie's photo in the day's newspaper, gone to the SPCA, filled out the forms for her, and taken her home. "I needed to walk more, and I wanted a dog to take with me. I took her for a walk at the SPCA. She walked just at the end of the lead and never pulled." Sadie was a stray and about two years old when Lucy met her. "She was just the right size and personality for me," Lucy said.

The meaning and value that Sadie holds for Lucy were most strongly expressed when Lucy said, "Sadie made me understand that a home is not a home until it has a dog in it." When I asked Lucy how she feels when she looks at the images of Sadie, she said that mostly she feels thankful for having had Sadie.

*The art-making process itself can create a physiological response of relaxation, an altering of mood, and even a form of meditation through the repetitive self-soothing qualities of the process and the materials.*

That feeling of thankfulness, the creation of images that make you feel thankful, and the placement of them in the most frequented parts of your home—is this a form of therapy? I think so.

### PUTTING IMAGE AWARENESS TO USE

Maybe you are a beginner rug hooker and often make other people's patterns. Or maybe you have been hooking for a couple of years but haven't yet used your own images in mat making.

If you can draw well enough to make your own images, then go for it! If not, here are a few ideas that I have found useful in creating my own mats:

- Use your own photos to inspire and/or to make templates. Enlarge them, emphasize details that you like, use details in a border or in the background. Make several copies of the photos, cut them out, and play with them, moving them around the mat.
- Use a photocopier or computer to enlarge images and make them different sizes. Play with the different sizes and tell a story with them, a story that is from your memory, or that you have heard.
- Download and print free templates from the internet. Hook only one example of the template, in an echo

pattern, to allow you to relax and enjoy the process and the wool itself. Then hook the background spontaneously, in a meditative way, without a pattern.

- Combine the templates or use different templates. Play with their color, size, and orientation. Make a swirling composition or add other shapes in the backgrounds. Put them in boxes if you want to.
- Use cutting to make your own shapes. There are many collage books to help you with this. One I really like is *Cut Paper Pictures* (2018) by Clover Robin.
- If you are using loosely formed shapes or organic shapes, think of the words that come to mind when you look at the images that inspired you to hook. Write them down and allow them to repeat in your mind as you hook. I heard the words "flow" and "change" as I hooked the mats shown here

I hope you experience some of the therapeutic benefits of rug hooking. For some makers, the benefits will be found in the socializing and friendships formed through a shared interest. For others, the benefits may be mostly meditative and therapeutic, or will lead to improvements in self-knowledge and understanding. Whatever the benefits of rug hooking are for you, I hope that you enjoy them! **RHM**

Lucy Richard is a fiber artist and the creator and teacher of the Woolly Mason Jar dyeing method. She lives in Moncton, New Brunswick. Gwen Dixon is a fiber artist and adult educator. She lives in Riverview, New Brunswick. You can find her on Facebook (Gwen Dixon).

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