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# Conserving Amana's Folk Arts: A Community Remaining Faithful

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# Conserving Amana's Folk Arts

## — *A Community Remaining Faithful* —

text and photos by  
Steven Ohrn

**F**OR THE PAST TWELVE MONTHS I have been welcomed into scores of Amana homes to conduct interviews and to examine and photograph private collections of both new and old Amana crafts. My purpose was to locate examples of crafts which were practiced in the past and have continued today: basketry, knitting, crocheting, embroidery, rug crocheting and braiding, quilting, tinsmithing, wood-working, and carpet weaving. Besides seeking the objects, some in use and some in storage, I sought, from conversations with the makers and keepers of these traditions, information on how the crafts were learned, used, and valued. Various degrees of change are witnessed by each of these craft areas, and individual artists vary considerably in remaining faithful to the old ways.

From the beginning the Amanas, also known as the Community of True Inspiration, have had an ambiguous relationship with the outside world. On the one hand, the ruling church elders attempted to keep the community self-sufficient and isolated from outside influences. On the other hand, in order to be self-supporting it became necessary to trade with outsiders, hire workers from the outside, and eventually welcome visitors.

Unlike the Amish, the people of Amana have always been progressive, willing to change with the times. To avoid religious persecution and improve their economic situation, they left Germany for New York, establishing a communal economic system to better survive. A few years later, when encroaching neighbors threatened their isolation, they willingly migrated to Iowa and established a new community. To survive the impact of the First World War and the Great Depression, the

communal system was replaced in 1932 with a capitalist economy. Today the outside world continues to challenge the way of life in the Amanas. In the 1960s the velocity of change increased with the rise of tourism, and efforts have been taken since then to preserve both the buildings and the skills inherited from communal times. Community living and handwork have become a tourist attraction in an age of alienation and mechanical reproduction.

The Amana art world mirrors the social and economic changes surrounding it. Basketry, once done exclusively by older men for internal use, has been revived by young women. The baskets, while remaining faithful to old patterns and techniques, have also become artistic symbols of old Amana. Woodworkers using advanced machinery compete for the tourists' demand for quality Amana furniture. The carpet weavers now more often make scatter and area rugs for passersby than room-size carpets for Amana homes. Quilts have become larger, to cover double, queen-, and king-size beds which were not used in former prudish times. Knitting, crocheting, and embroidery have changed the least but the number of women practicing these arts is dwindling. Finally, tinsmithing, particularly the making of lanterns, reflects a stronger interest in revitalizing Amana culture and preserving the way the Amanas looked in the old days than in providing essential daily wares. The Amana art world of the 1980s is responding to outside forces which encourage both preservation and commercialization.

Although before the 1932 change to a capitalist economy, outsiders did buy Amana craft objects for everyday use, today those same items are more valued and sought as "folk art" and antiques. Indeed there is a danger that the





Flower gardens planted and tended by Amana women brightened old Amana's landscape. While not prohibiting ornamental plantings, the church elders encouraged more practical efforts: kitchen gardens, fruit trees, and vineyards. Today Henrietta Berger of South Amana continues the tradition of flower gardening.

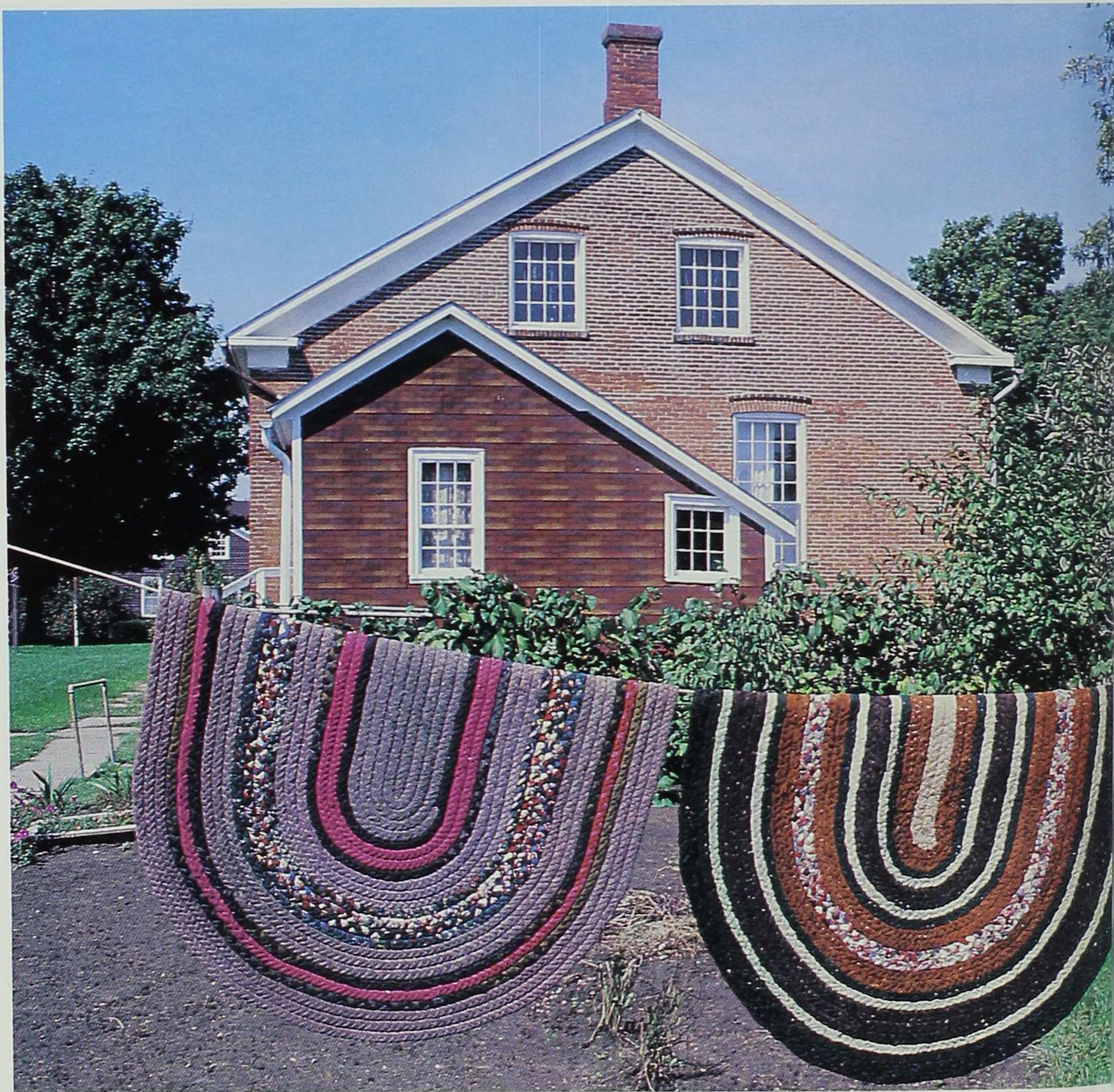
material culture of the Amana Colonies will gravitate to collections outside the Amanas. Part of the purpose of this project has been to generate an awareness that traditional crafts and the knowledge of how to create them are just as important a legacy as the Amanas' architectural heritage. But just as it takes a community effort to preserve historically significant structures, so it takes a community to actively conserve and treasure traditional arts and crafts.

In 1978 the Amana Arts Guild was founded to preserve and present the artistic heritage of the Amana Colonies. Over the years, through a wide range of activities the guild has become a model of community involvement in cultural

conservation. Guild members have organized workshops, symposia, festivals, and exhibitions focusing on Amana traditional art. Even more lasting has been their renovation of the High Amana church and school into an art gallery and folklife center.

Because of this innovative atmosphere in the Amana Colonies, the Iowa Arts Council in 1985 proposed to work jointly with the Amana Arts Guild and other local groups to organize a major exhibition, "Remaining Faithful: Amana Folk Art in Transition," highlighting continuity and change in Amana arts and crafts. With funds from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Iowa Arts Council, the State Historical Society of Iowa, and various Amana organizations, my fieldwork commenced in 1986. The following photo essay offers a sampling of the exhibition, which will open in mid-March in the new State Historical Building in Des Moines.





# Handmade scatter rugs

Little went to waste in old Amana. Women braided, knitted, and crocheted worn-out cotton and wool clothing into throw rugs. Catherine Schuerer carefully braided concentric circles of color (above) which contrasted sharply with the striped woven carpets they protected.

The random combinations of colors in this crocheted rug (upper right) made by Anna Marie Hofer in the 1930s or 1940s is typical of older crocheted rag rugs.





Never completely isolated from mainstream American and pan-German culture, Amana women adopted popular crafts and patterns which became Amana traditions. Carrie Shoup hooked scores of rugs based on popular and personal designs, such as this floral rug (right).





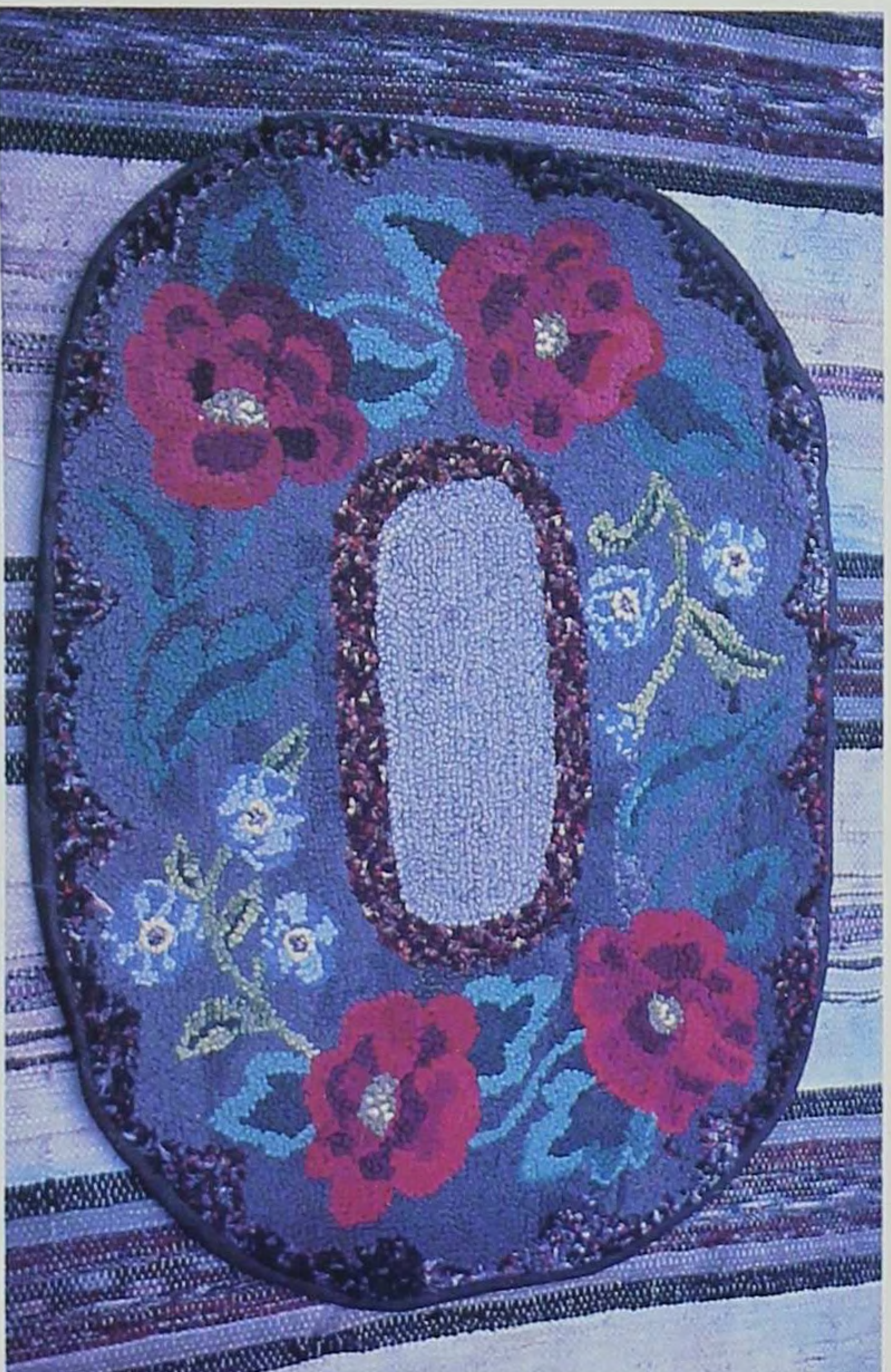
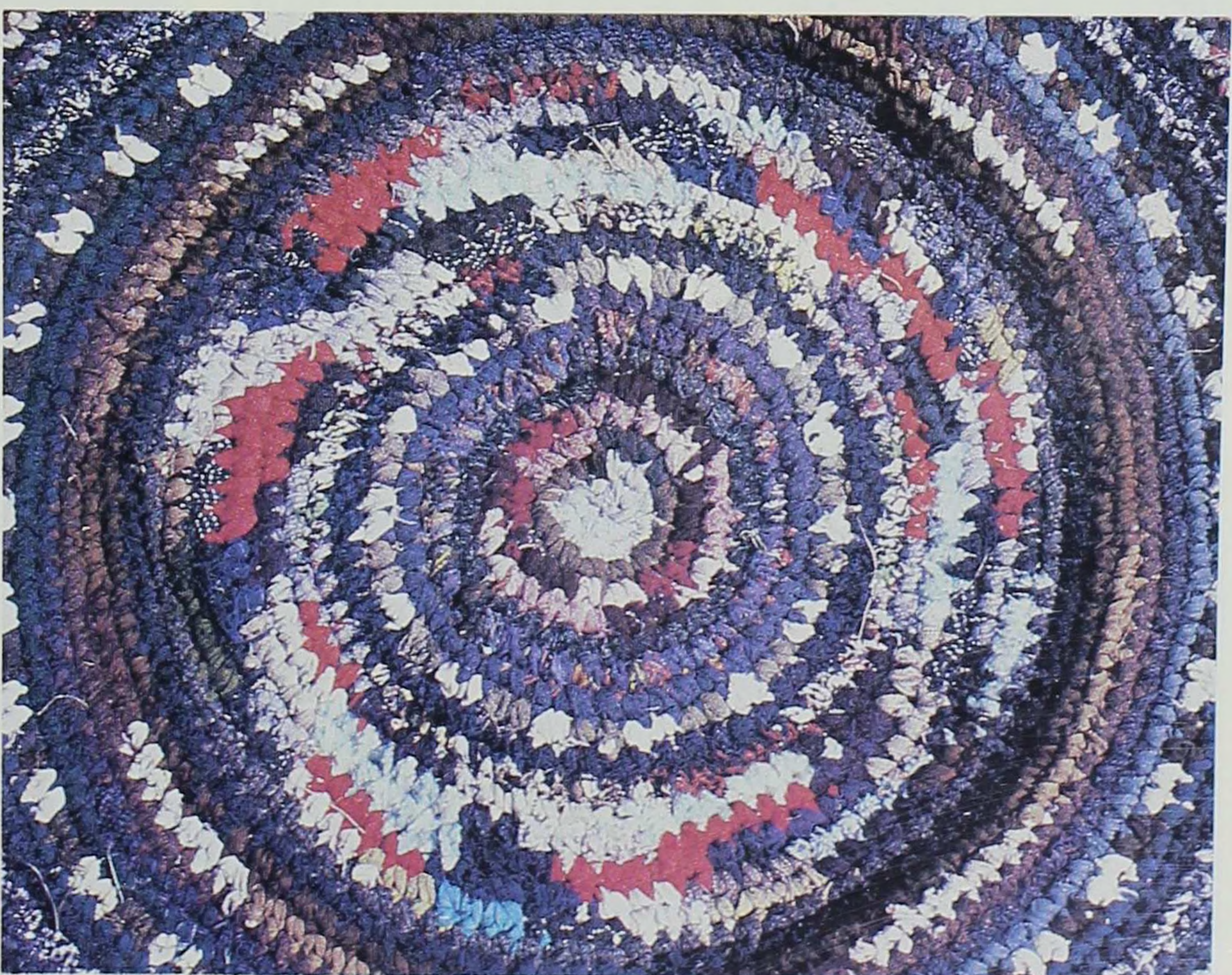


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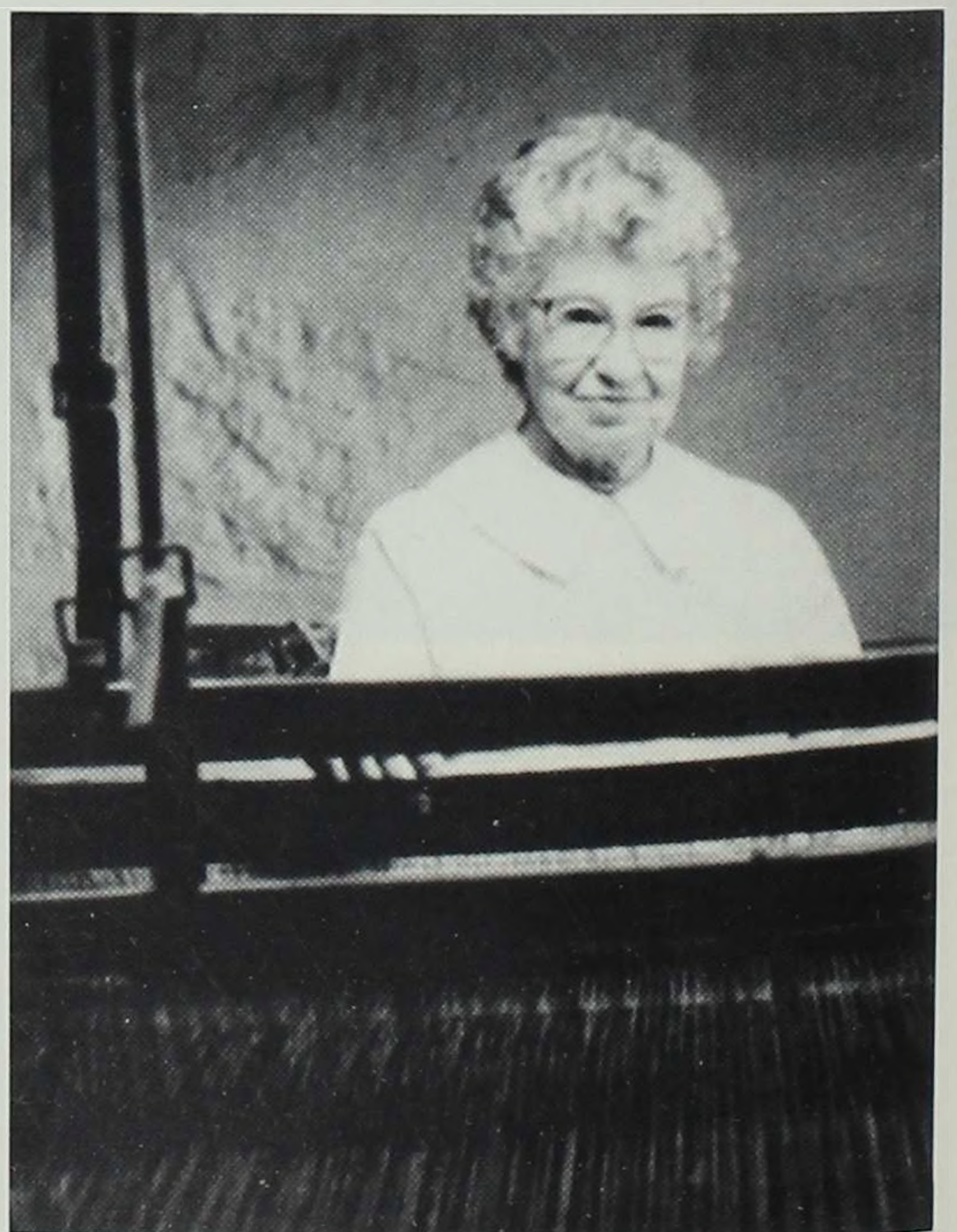


# Woven carpets

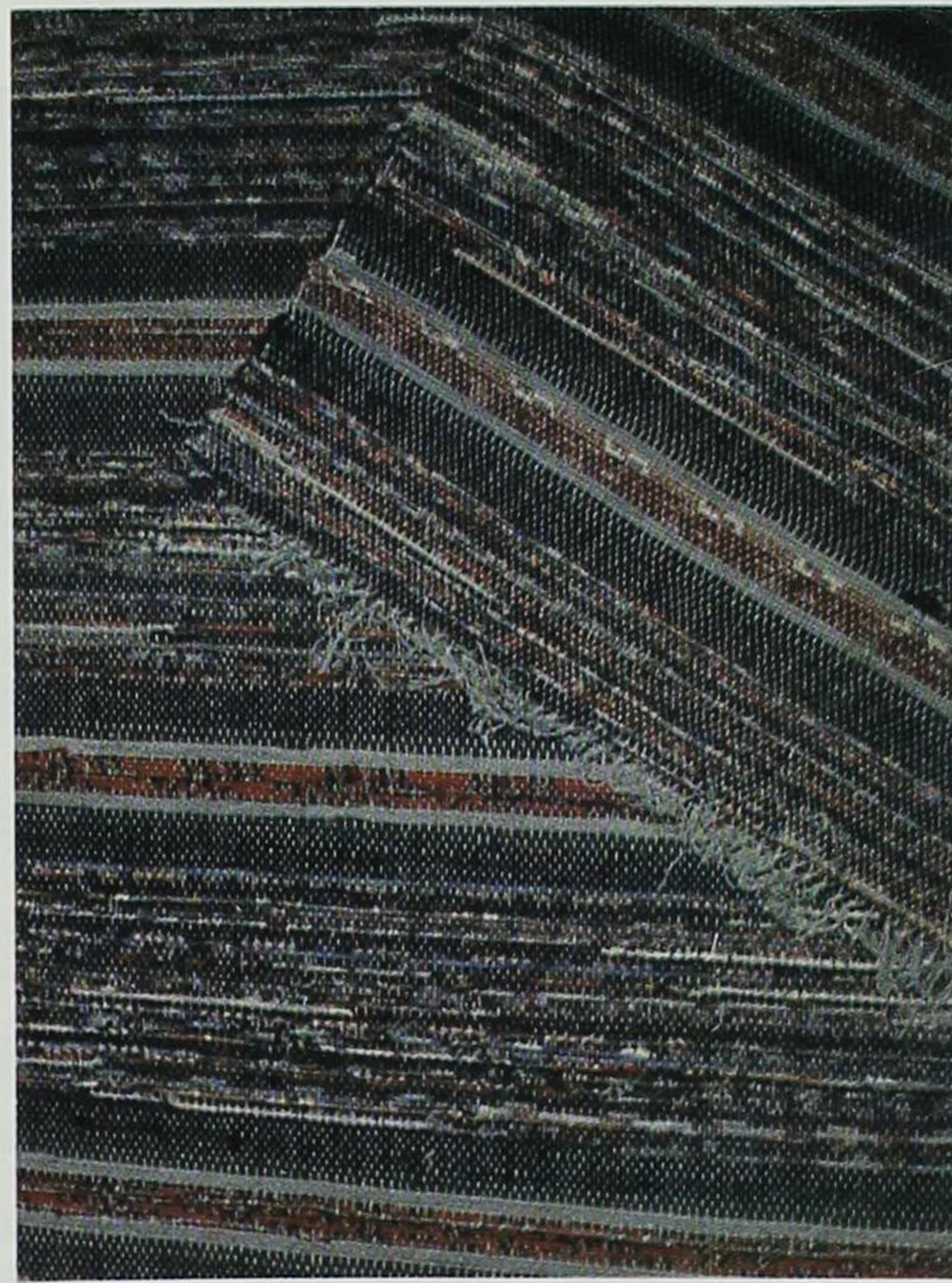
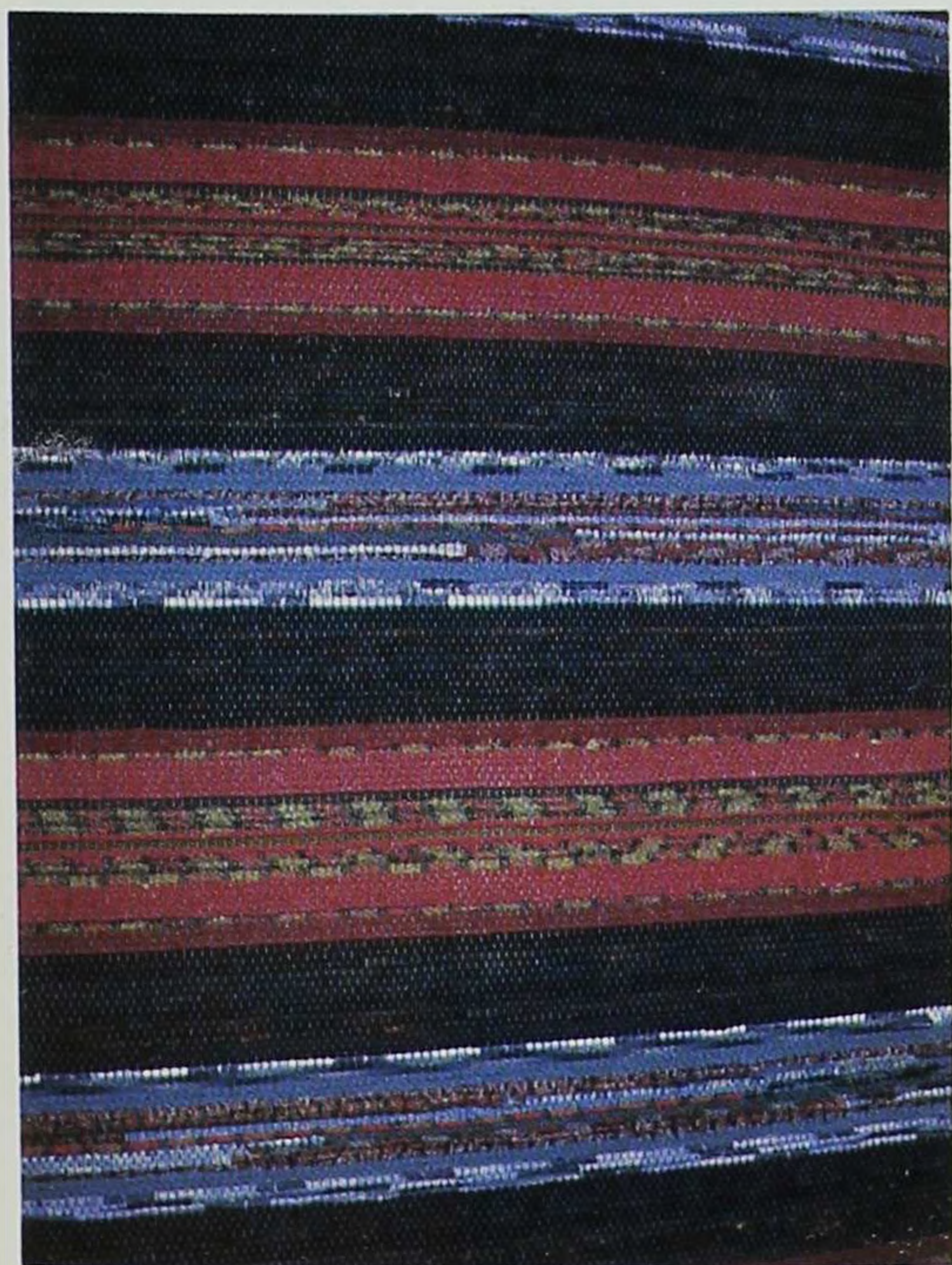
Amana woven rag carpets were made by retired men who combined dyed (gray, brown, beige) cotton rags with brightly colored scraps of wool (top right). Their designs were highly controlled stripes. In recent years women have woven most Amana carpets. They have been weaving hit-and-miss (random combination of various colored rag strips) designs from mill ends obtained from the Amana Woolen Mill (bottom right).

The George Berger family of South Amana has woven carpets for four generations. In the past, most orders were for wall-to-wall carpeting; today, most customers request throw and area rugs. George Berger encourages son Jeremy (left) to keep the family tradition alive.

Dorothy Trumpold (below) continues weaving on her grandfather's loom. Her husband, Carl Trumpold (lower left), handles the arduous task of preparing rags for weaving by sewing the strips together.











In each Amana village willow baskets were woven by men too elderly for heavy physical work. Most carrying and storing needs were satisfied by the basket makers. Although her deceased husband, Philip Dickel, is recognized as an "artist," Elizabeth Dickel (left) uses his "art" as he originally intended.

## Basketry

Although most Amana baskets were woven with cultivated willow, slough and rye grass baskets were used in the community bakeries for dough rising. A few coiled Easter baskets, with wooden bottoms and handles (below), were also made and are rare and prized today.





One distinctive aspect of Amana basketry is a replaceable bottom rim (right) inserted after the basket is made. The rim protects the body of the basket and can be replaced when necessary. Today, basket makers regularly repair long-neglected baskets.



In 1974, Joanna Schanz (above) sought out Philip Dickel to learn, "hands-on," the art of cultivating, preparing, and weaving willow. Today Schanz, together with Kathy Kellenberger and Laura Kleinmeyer, perpetuates traditional Amana basketry. Lower right, Schanz teaches David Schmidt of Waterloo the Amana way.

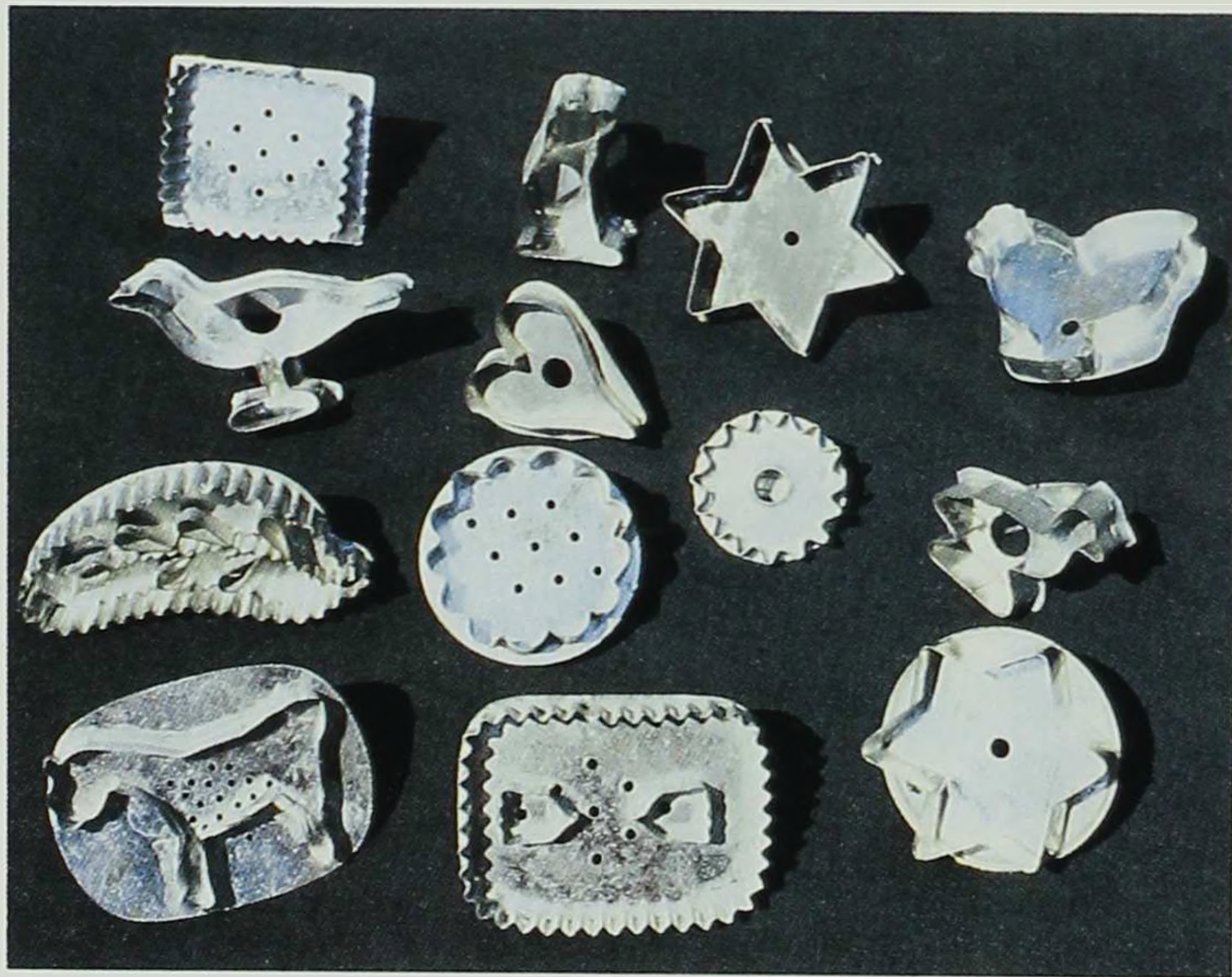


On special occasions Alvin Werner of East Amana made particularly beautiful baskets. He wove this laundry basket (above) in 1929 as a wedding present for Louise Schuerer Blechschmidt. She used it only a few times before storing it; she thought it was too nice to use.



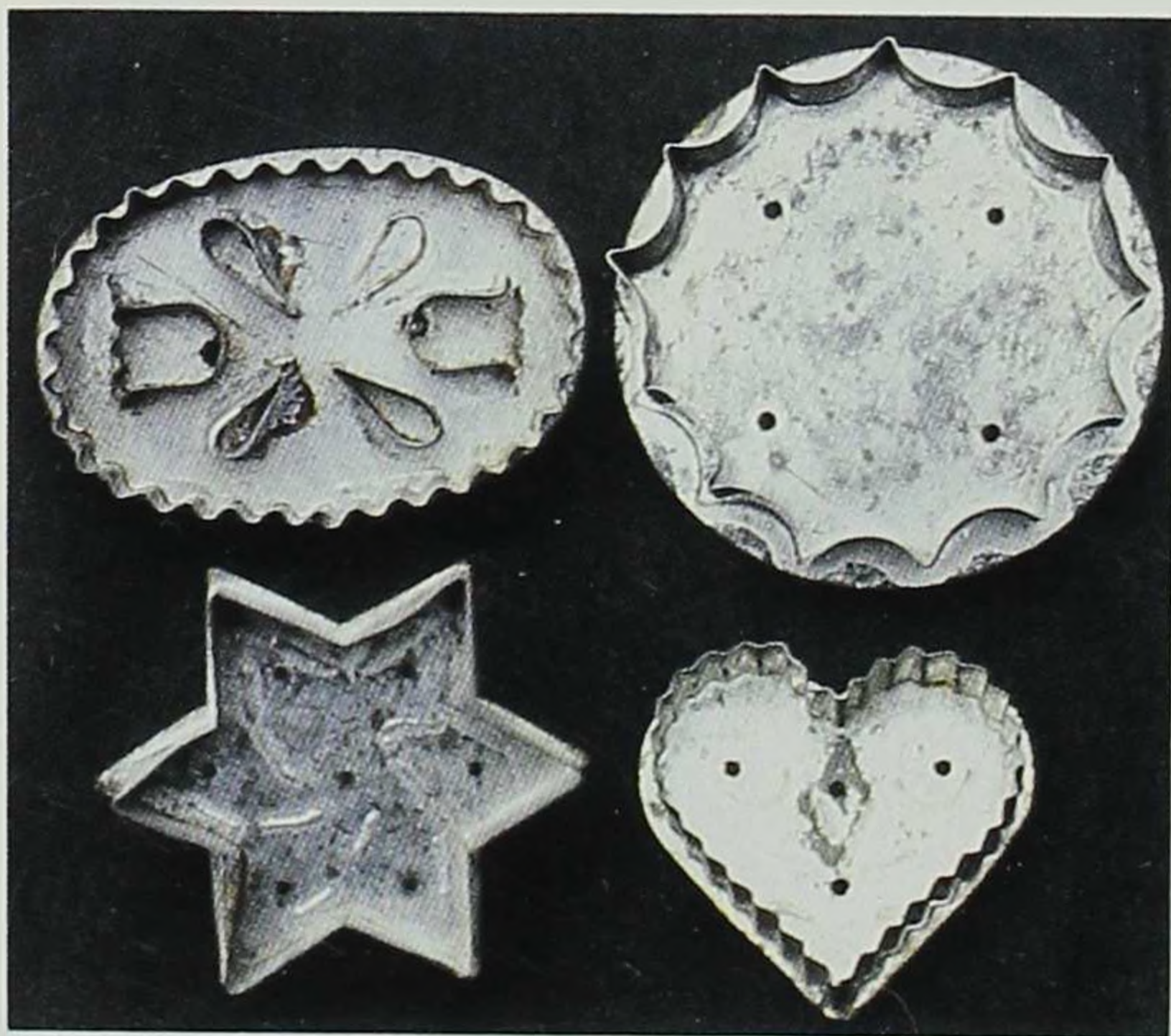


# Tinsmithing



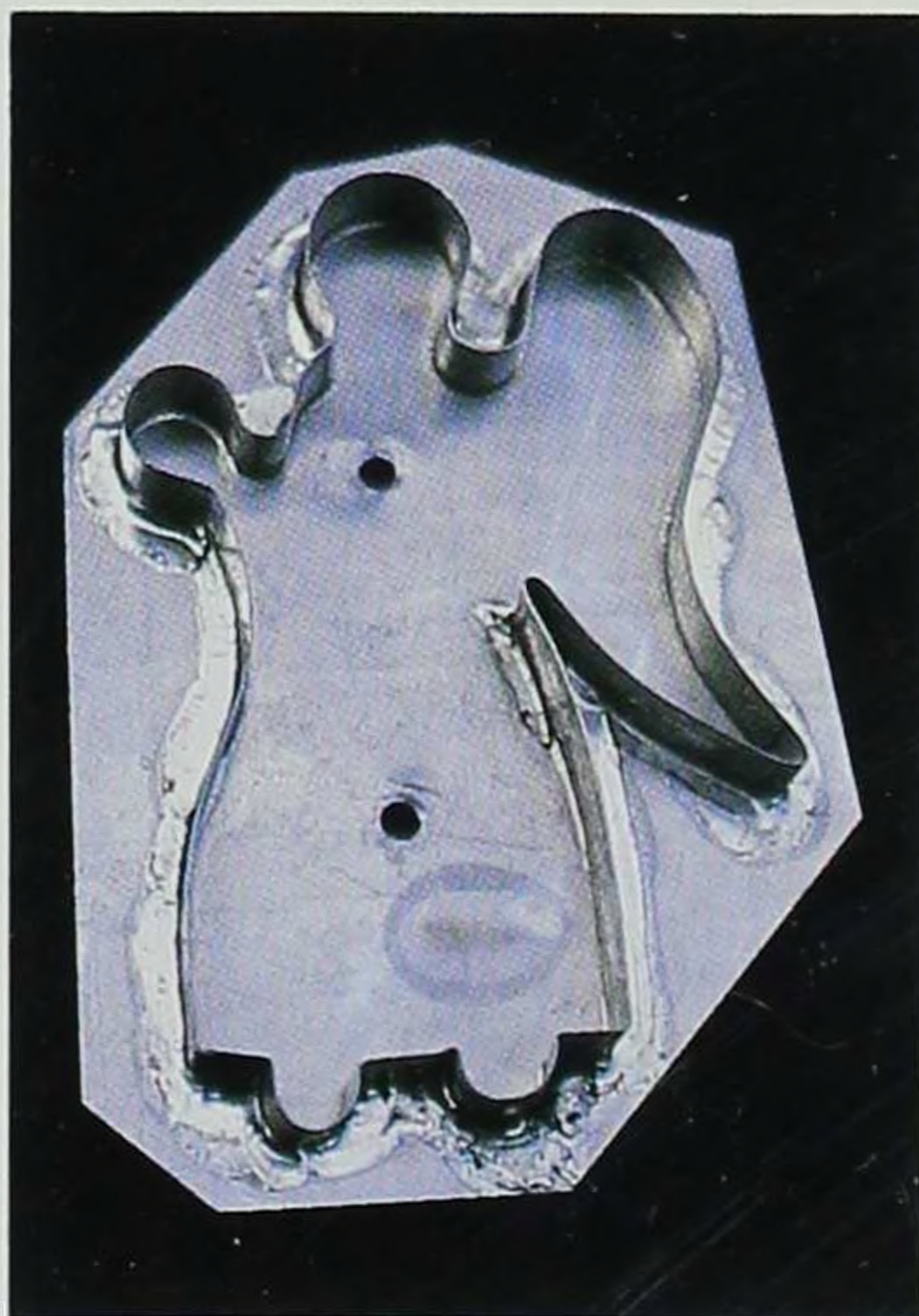
Tinsmithing shops in the Amanas mainly produced and repaired primarily useful wares (such as the pails on the right) for community kitchens in each village. With the end of communal living, tinsmiths and their large community kitchen utensils became antiquated and by 1941 the last shop closed.

The tinsmith's whimsical side was expressed in cookie cutter forms (left). At Christmas, "bushel baskets" of sugar cookies and marzipan were baked in the communal kitchens for home consumption. At Easter, bunnies were cut, baked, and placed in baskets with dyed eggs. George Erzinger accommodated his son's sweet tooth with this ten-inch cutter (below).





After several years of neglect, traditional Amana tinsmithing was revived in 1980 by Bill Metz (right), a sheet metal worker. He acquired the tinsmithing tools from one of the shops and has been producing tinware and teaching the skills ever since.



A decade after the last tinsmith shop closed in Homestead, Carl Moershel recycled tin cans into an angel (above) and other cookie cutter forms for his family.

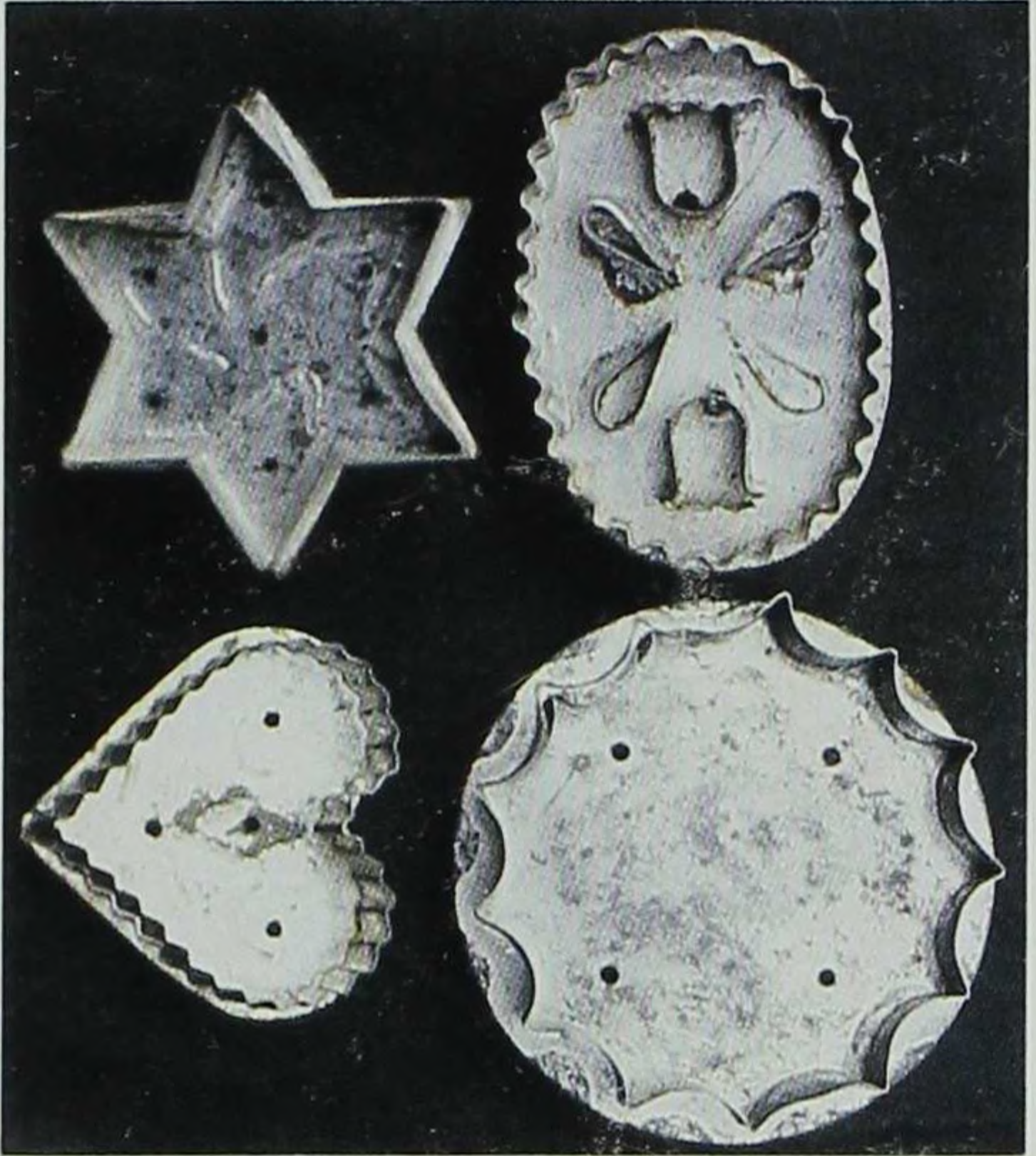


# Tinsmithing

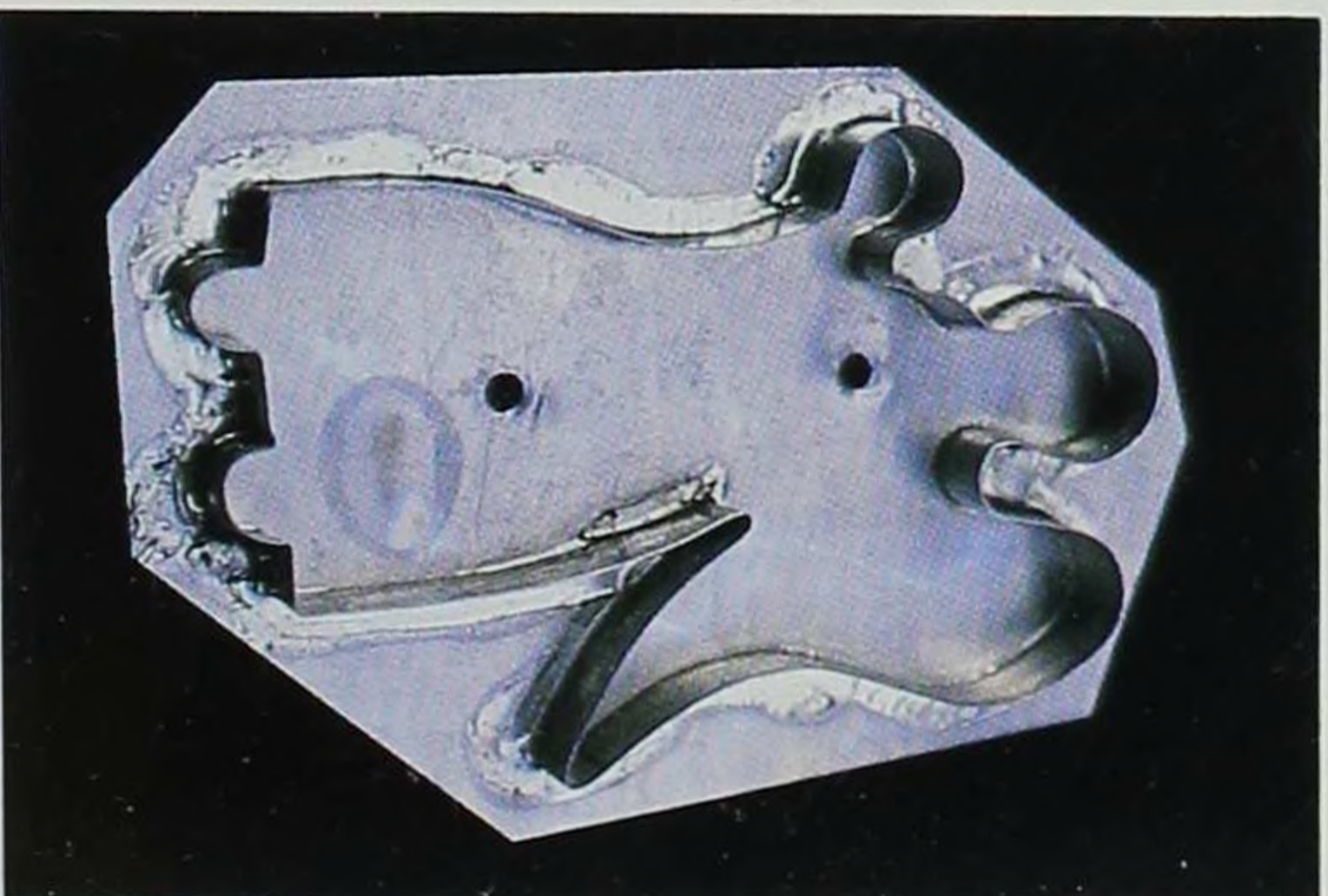
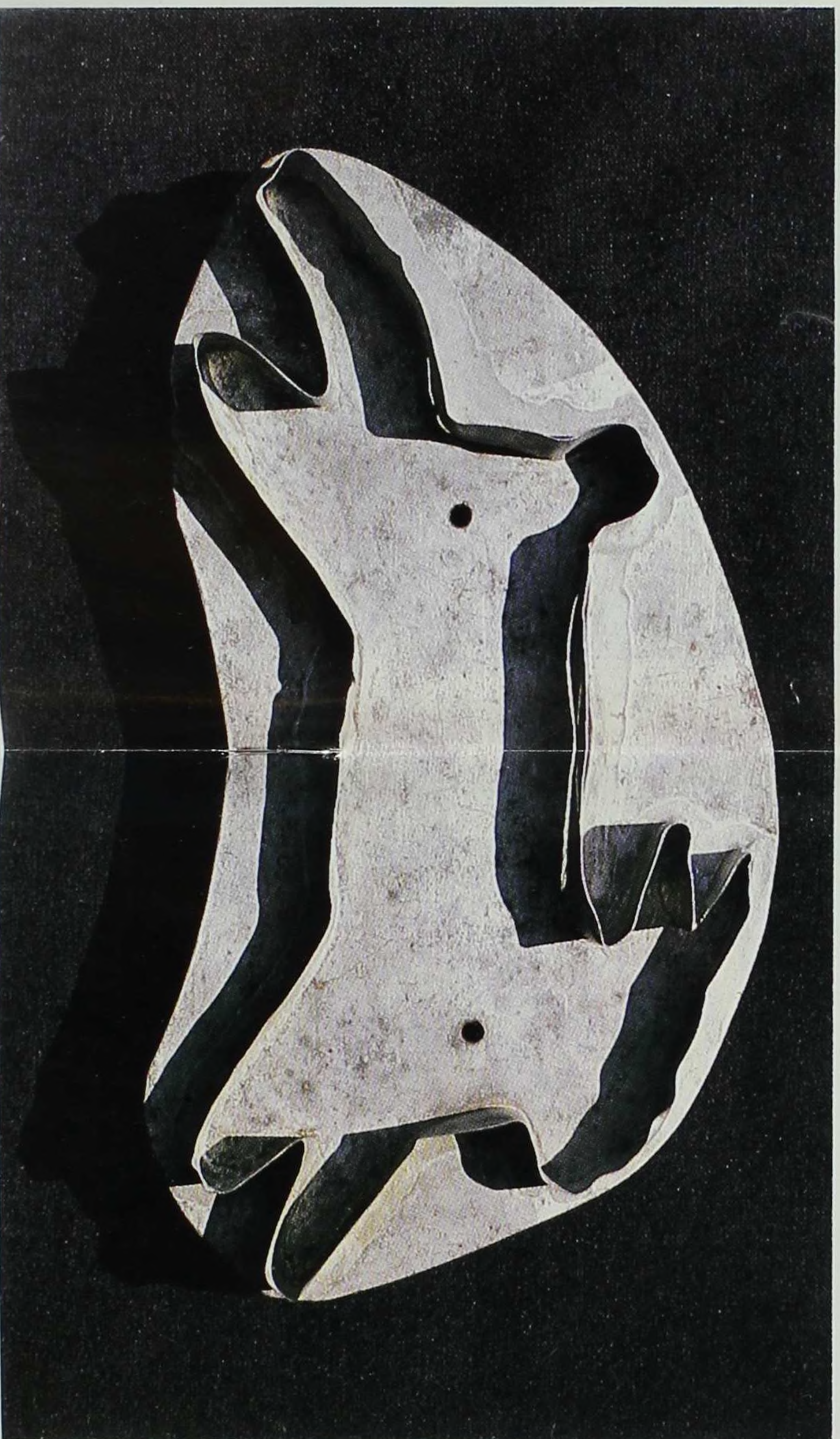
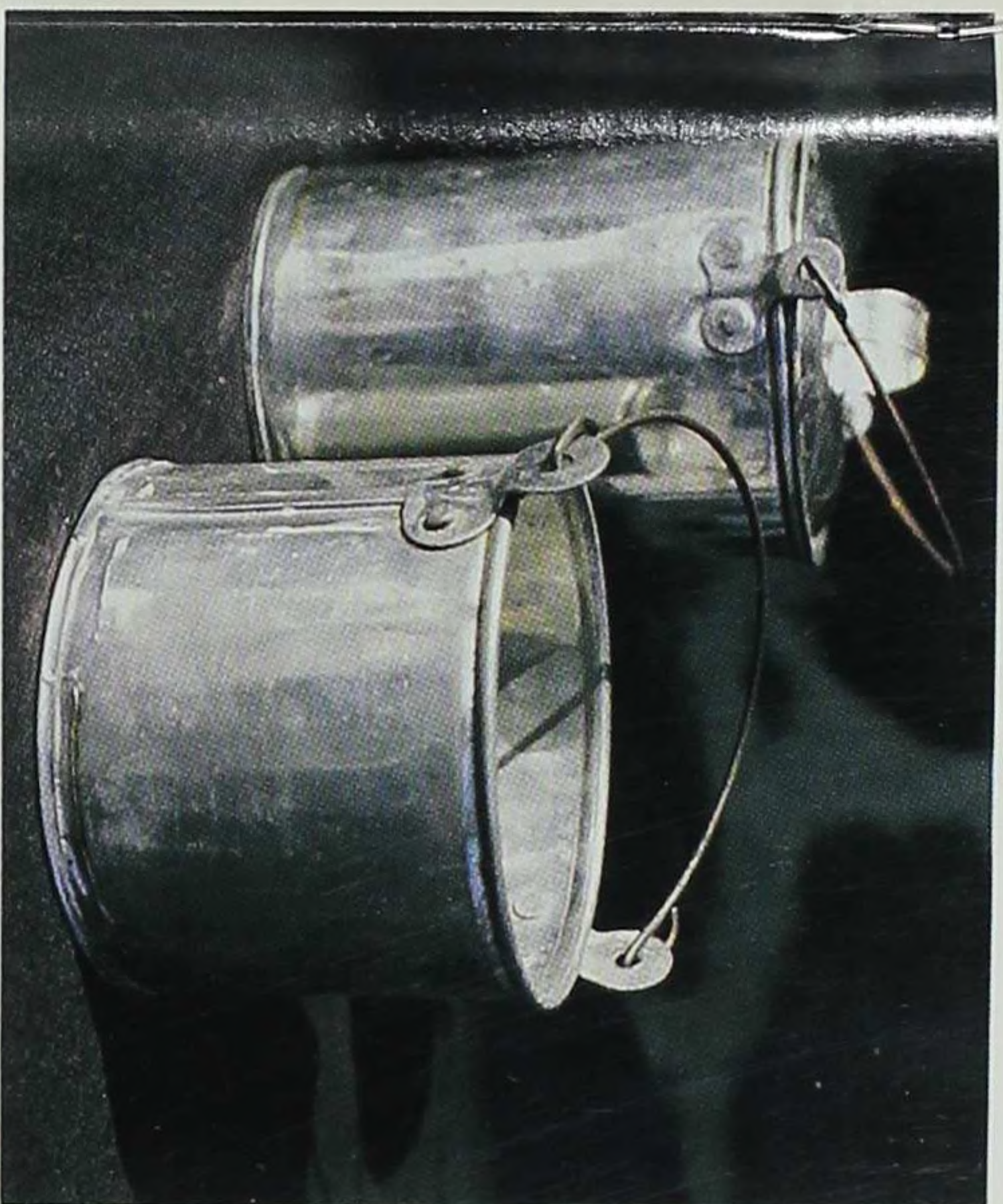
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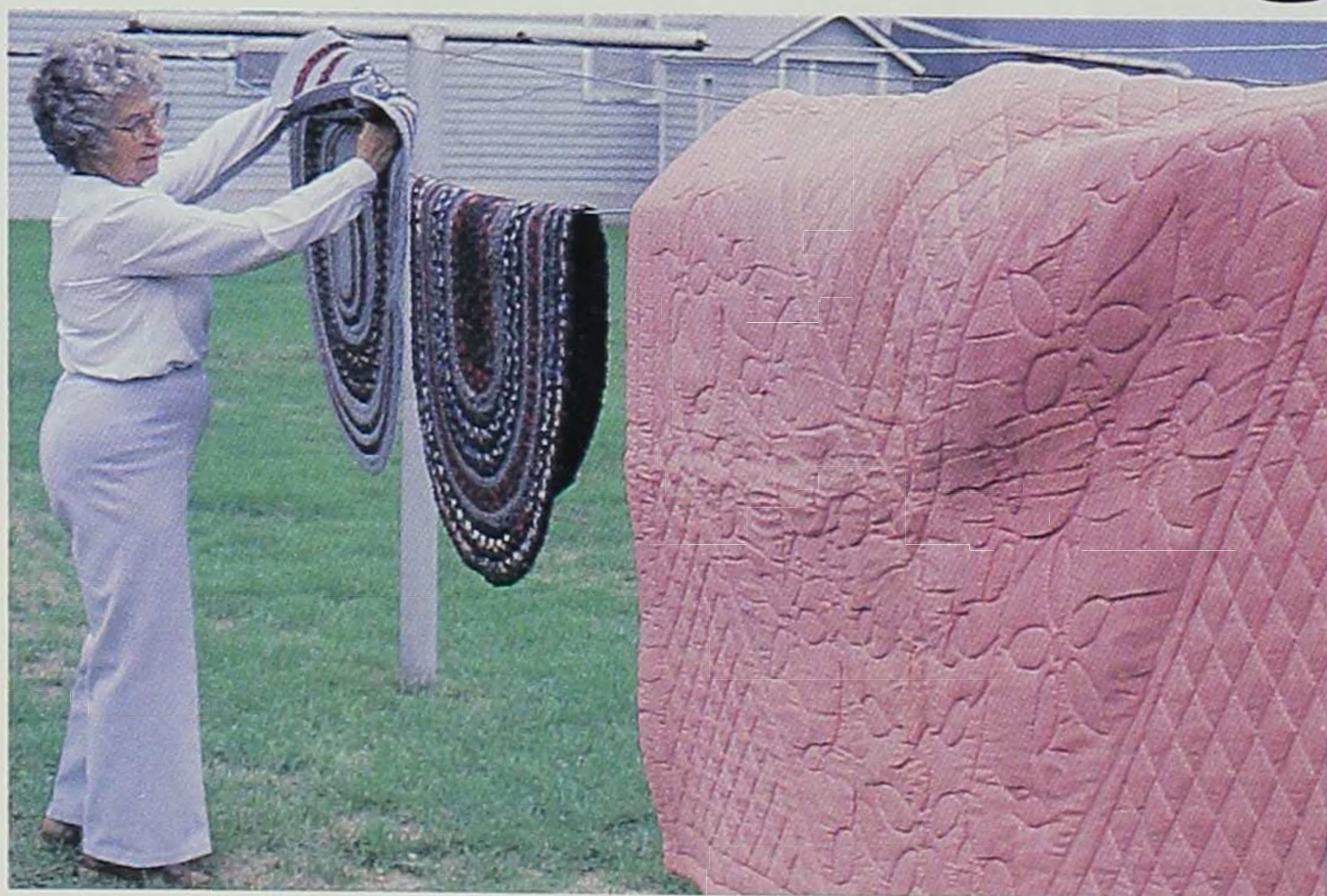


A decade after the last tinsmith shop closed in Homestead, Carl Moershel recycled tin cans into an angel (above) and other cookie cutter forms for his family.





## Quilting



Quilting in the Amanas has always been a group—usually family—effort. Similar to comforters, most Amana quilts are “plain cloth” or “single piece” rather than pieced scraps of material. Artistry is expressed by designs chalked with templates and strings. Craftsmanship is proven with fine, regular stitchery. (Above) Dorothy Zuber, Elizabeth Parvin, and others quilt and visit weekly in Lisette Metz’s Middle Amana parlor.

Prior to the Great Change all Amana quilts were made for single beds and were sometimes protected by store-bought bedspreads. Since the Change, quilts are made larger and have become the top layer on double, queen-, and king-size beds. Dorothy Schuerer Trumpold (left) treasures one of the wedding quilts her family made for her in 1933.

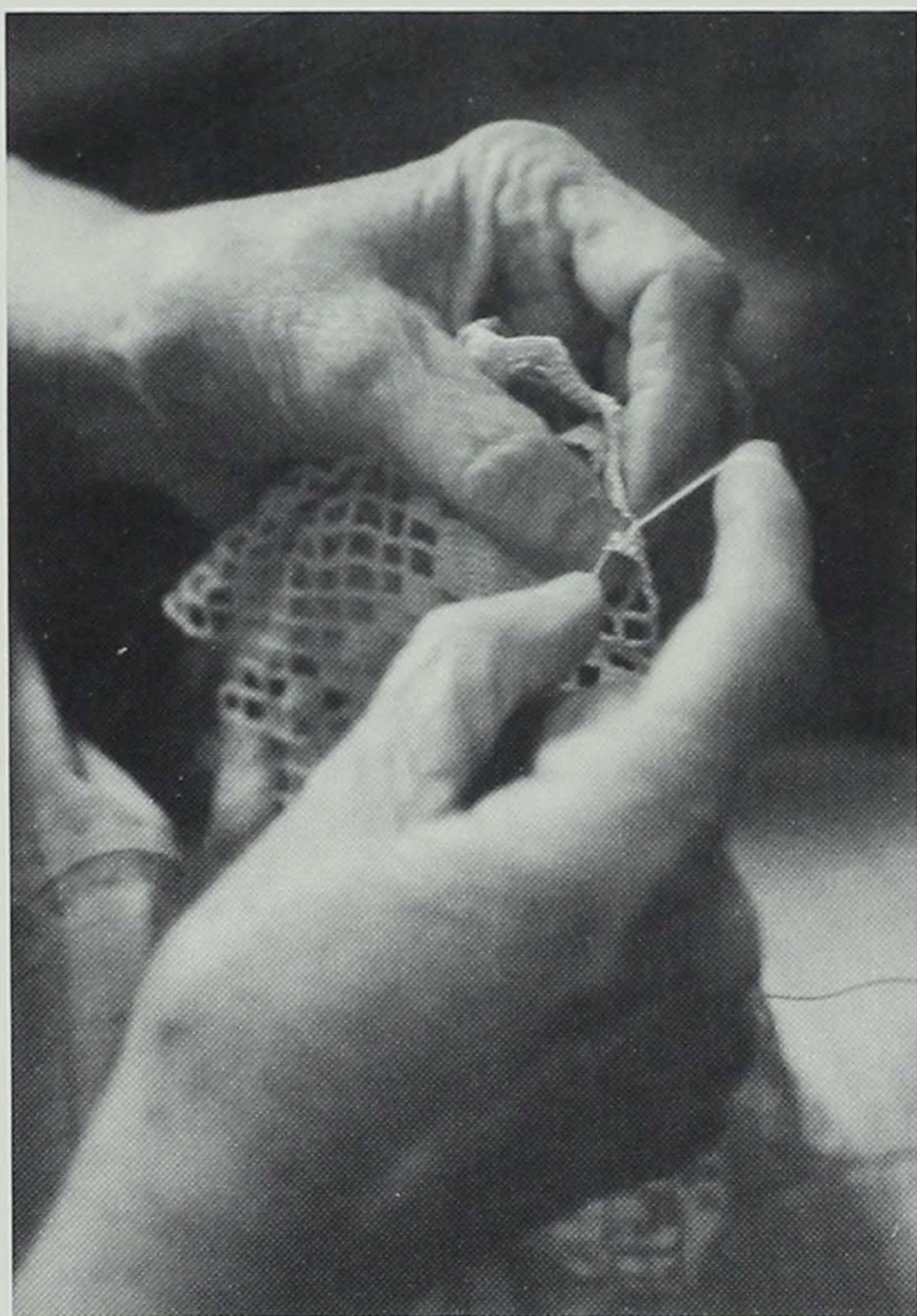




Attic trunks and *Schranks* (wardrobes) protect quilts which have been rarely used. A “use the old to save the new” philosophy resulted in the preservation of several decades of Schuerer family quilting hung out above for the camera’s view. Details show a *Geliebtkranz* (sweetheart pattern, lower left) on a 1929 wedding quilt and a *Rosenkranz* (rose pattern, lower right) on a 1927 quilt.







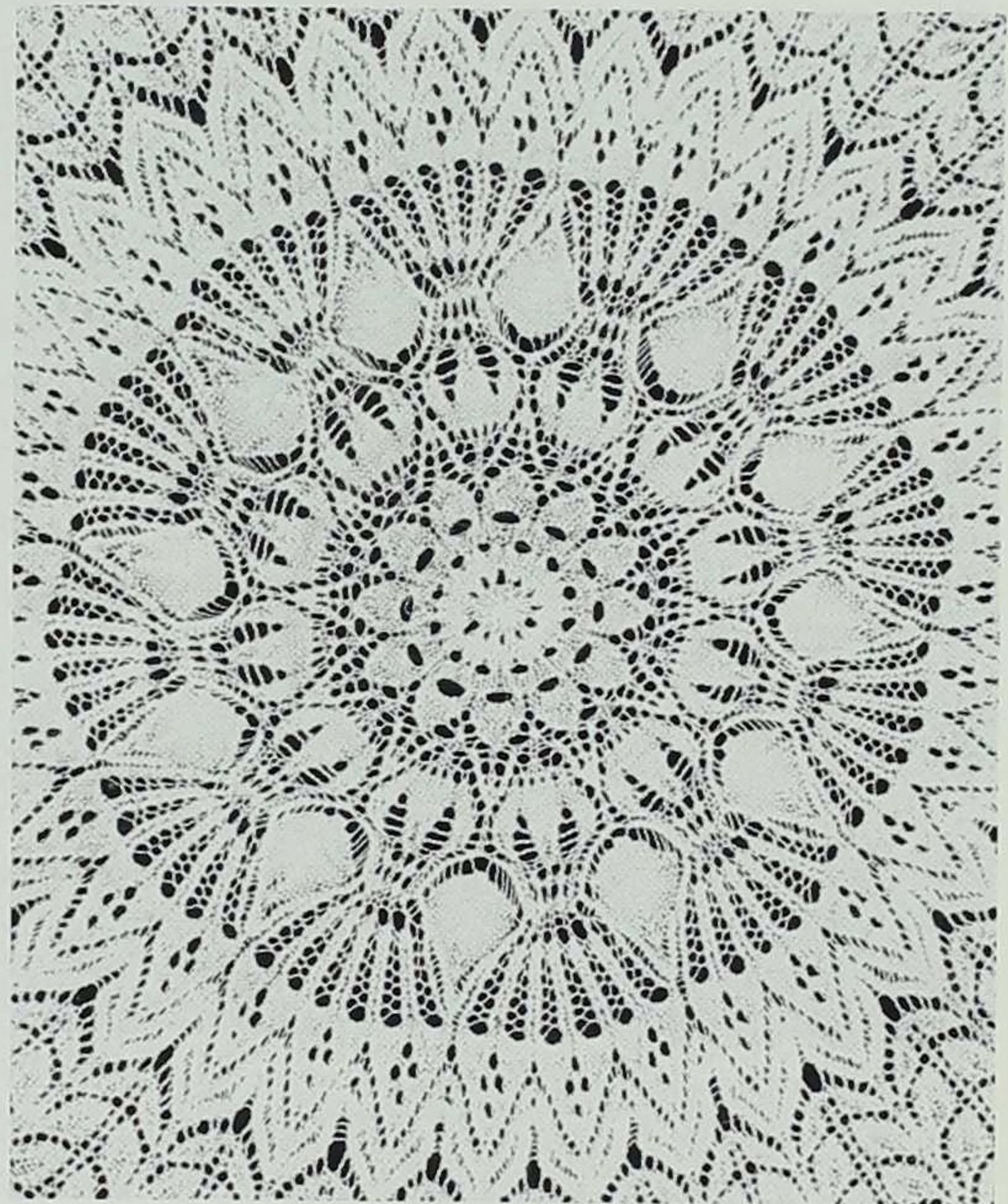
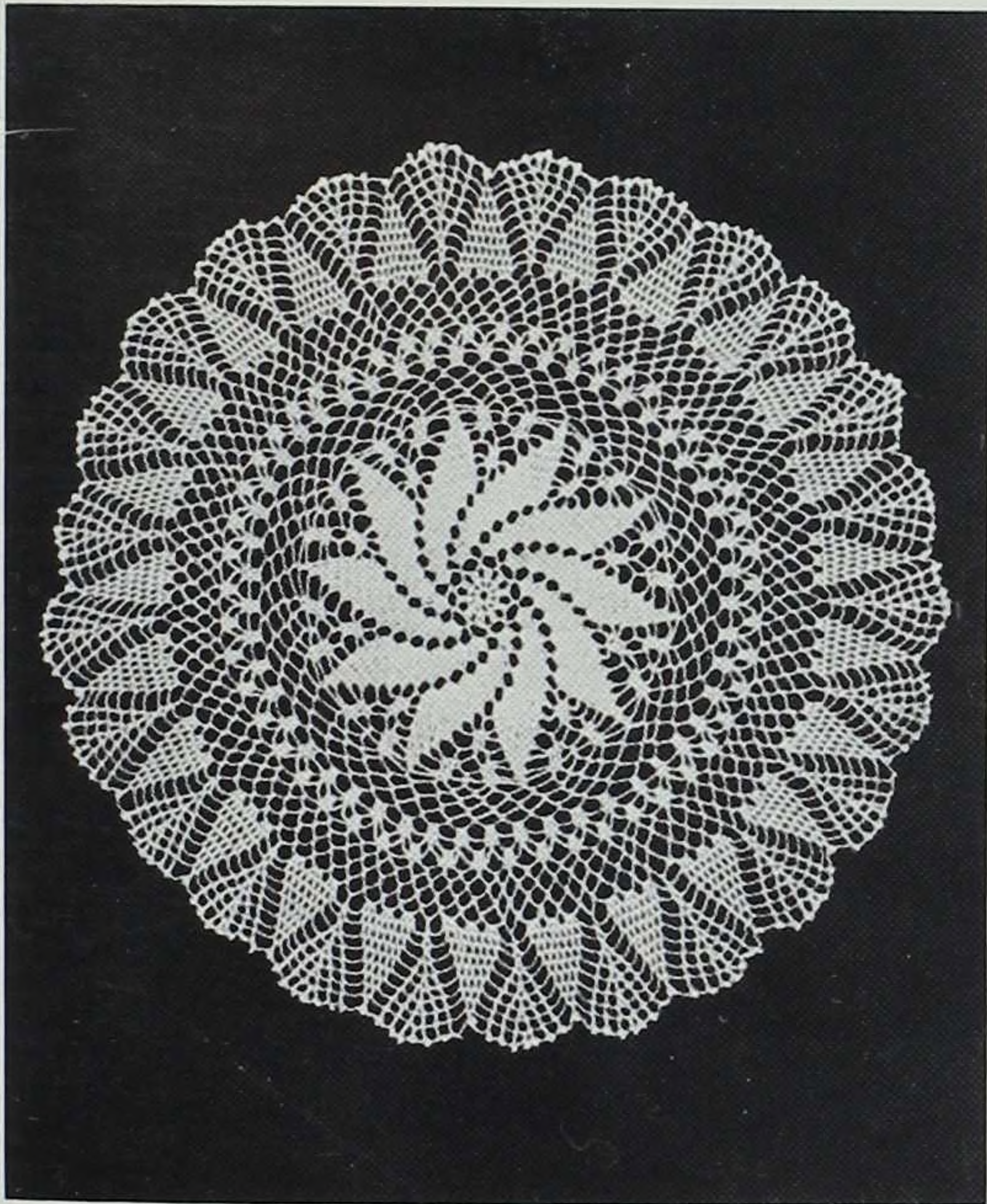
Making lace by needle, hook, and shuttle, following patterns taken from family memory as well as from women's magazines such as *Hausfrau*, was universal in old Amana. (See examples on the right.) Today only older women make fine, intricate lace to protect table tops and to decorate primarily functional linen such as pillowcases and handtowels.

## Crocheting, knitting, and tattling

During communal times both boys and girls learned to knit plain mittens and stockings. For more than fifty years, snowflakes, deer, and other motifs have embellished mittens like these by Renee Driscoll, who learned knitting from her mother and grandmother.











Before 1932 the church elders discouraged worldly displays, urging community members to live and dress simply. But the human urge to be creative led to plain black clothing trimmed with black lace, to needlepoint belts and suspenders, and to this colorful monogram (left) embroidered by Henrietta Roemig Erzinger on her husband's silk hatband.

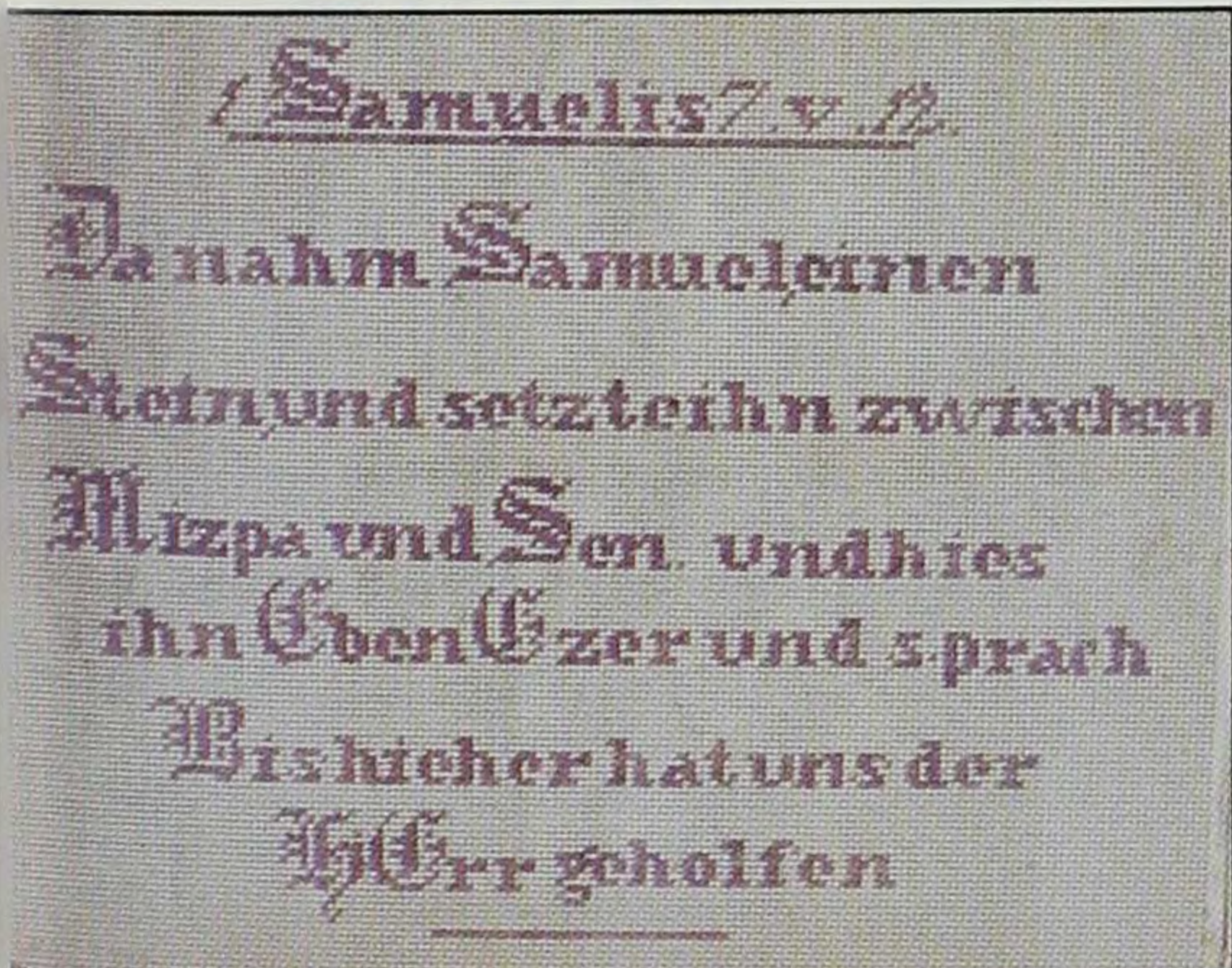
## Embroidery



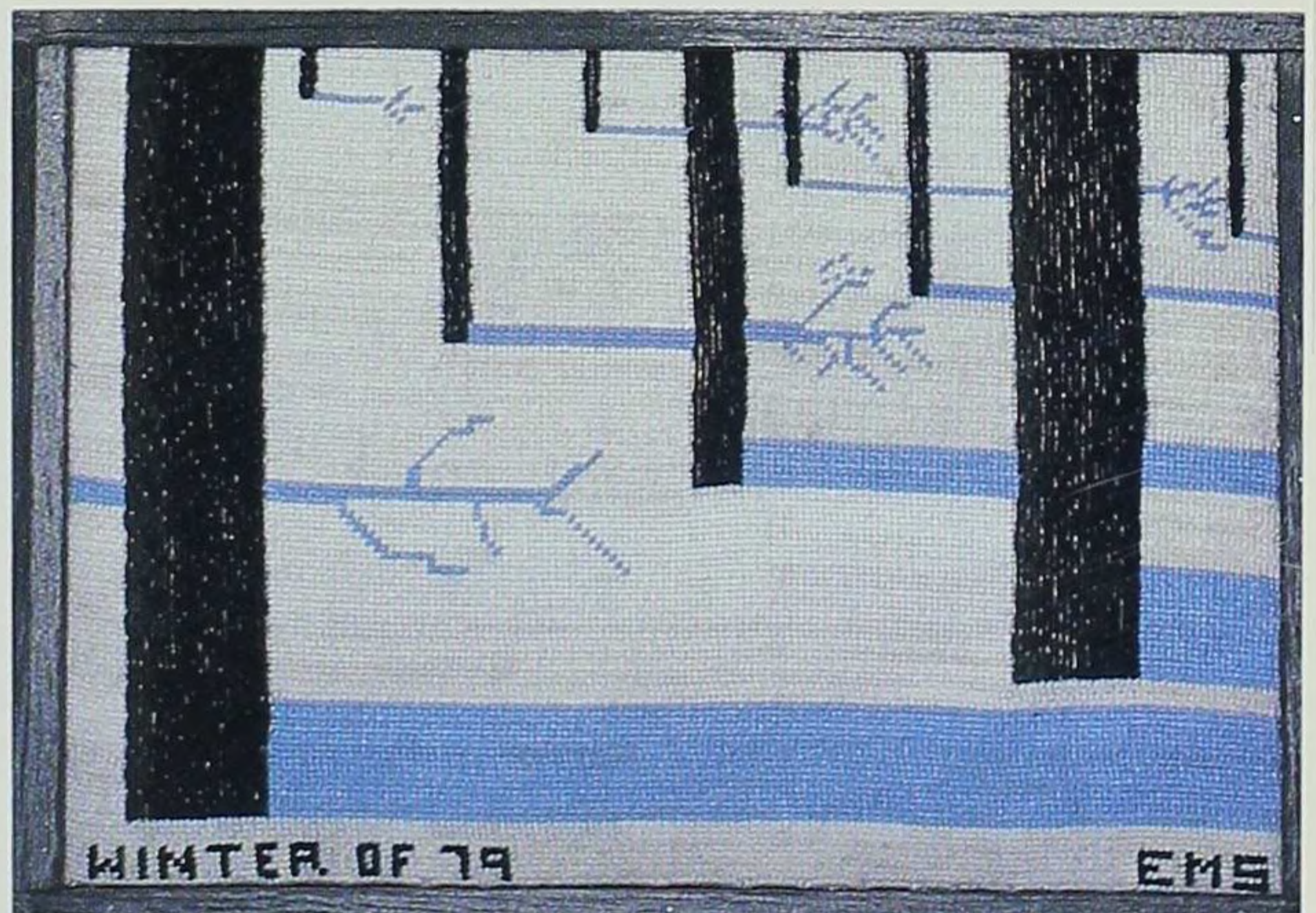
By stitching samplers girls learned practical sewing skills. Samplers such as this one by Catherine Schaup have become treasured family heirlooms framed and displayed as art.



German *Haussegen* (house blessings), often quoting Scripture, decorated the traditional blue Amana walls while reinforcing religious values and community standards. Some house blessings were entirely homemade (below); others were embroidered on punched "Berlin" paper patterns mail-ordered from the Old Country (right).

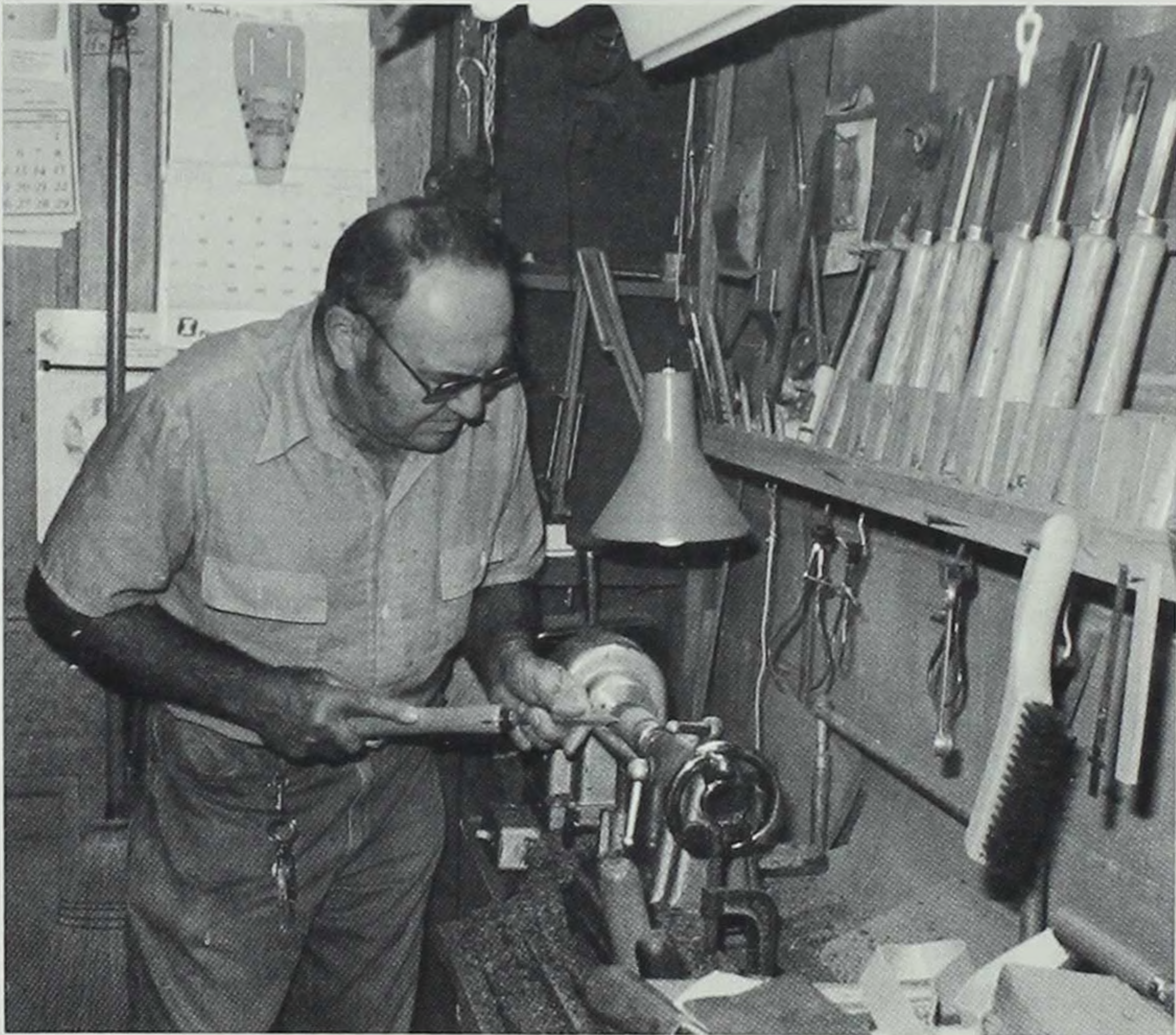


A practical need for throw pillows excused colorful floral needlework brightening otherwise plain furniture. In 1929 Louise Blechschmidt cross-stitched these vivid flowers climbing a trellis (above).



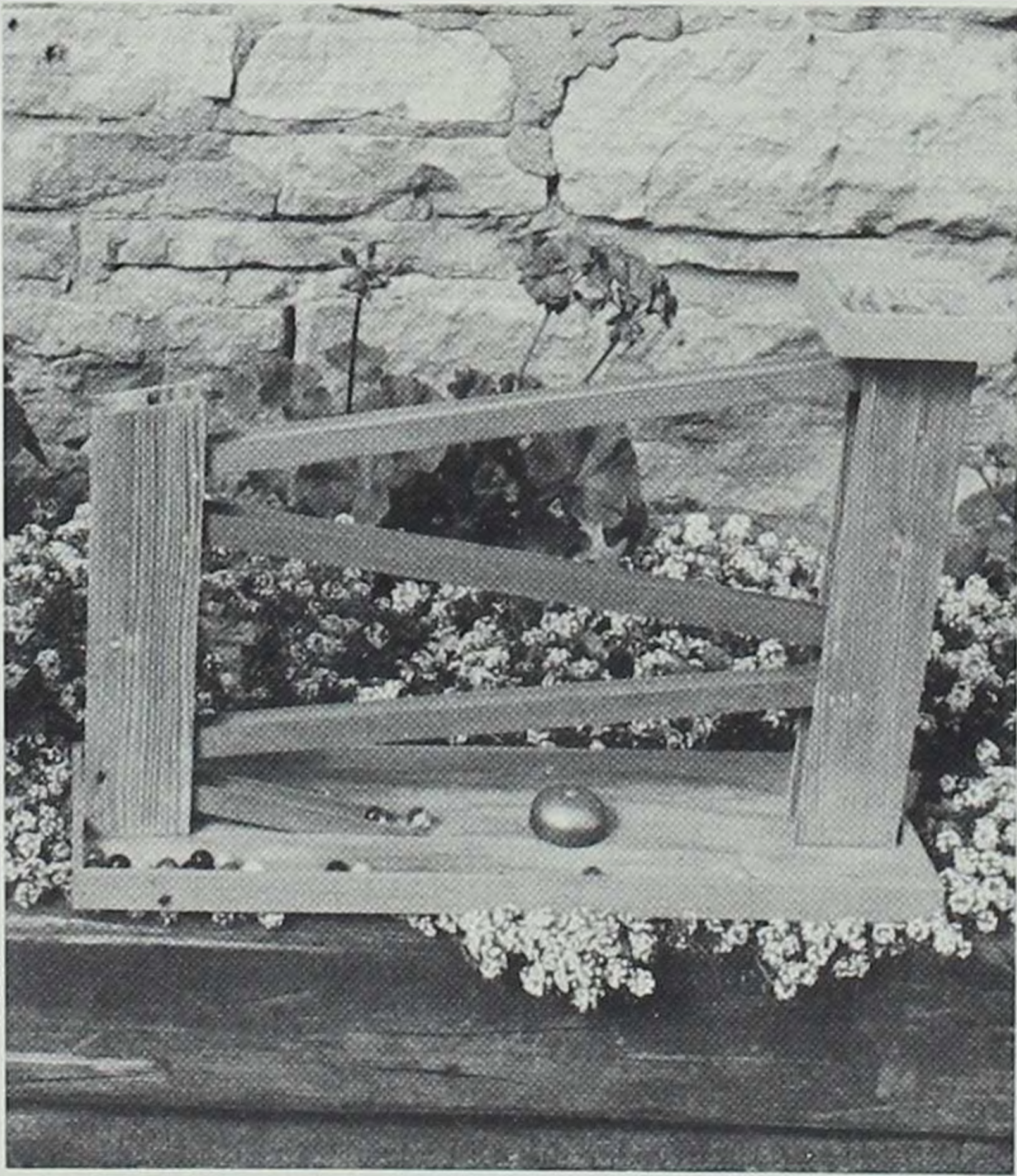
Forbidden in old Amana, representative art is commonly created today. Employing stitching skills learned as a child, Elizabeth Schoenfelder cross-stitches landscapes and other scenes, such as the one above.



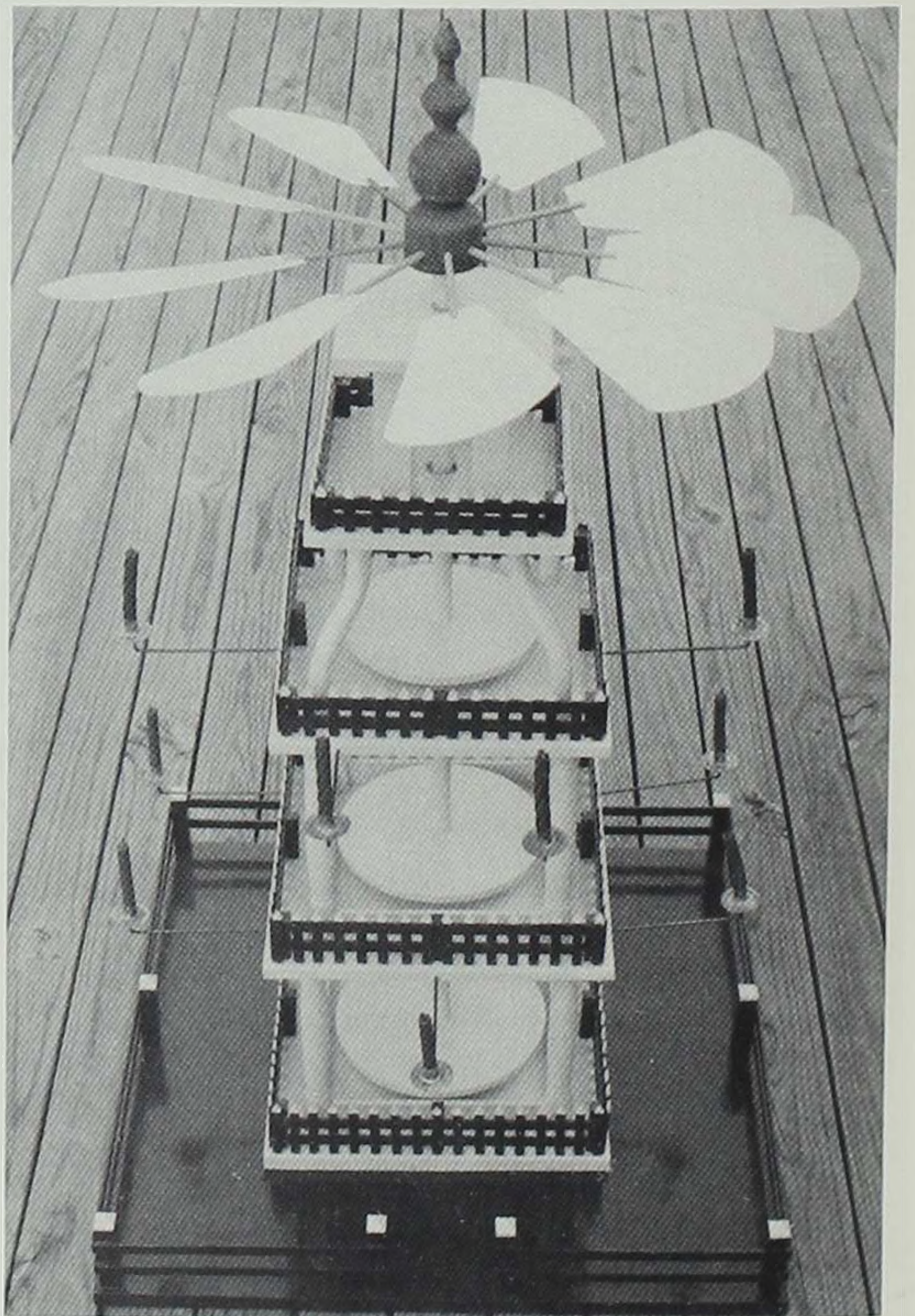


## Wood- working

Amana cabinet shops produced most of the furniture and other wood items needed by the community before 1932. After that, the Amana Society Furniture Shop and others increasingly produced for the outside world. Now retired from the furniture shop, Walter "Pete" Ehrmann (left) continues to produce small novelty items in his basement workshop.



Alfred Kellenberger, a retired carpenter, makes whimsical toys such as the *Klickerbahn* (marble machine) above. In the past such toys were commonly made as special gifts to children by fathers and grandfathers. Kellenberger recently made a Christmas pyramid and has been teaching others in the community how to make the wooden holiday pyramids (example on the right).





Willard Geiger (right) works for the Amana Society Furniture Shop by day. In his spare time at home he makes "whatnot" shelves, which display collectibles in traditional Amana homes. Here he examines the filigree.



Platform yard swings and benches of curved slats are typically part of the traditional Amana landscape. Below, Carl and Lisette Metz enjoy the swing he made for their garden in Middle Amana.







ALL PHOTOS COURTESY THE AUTHOR