

TREES ARE MY INSPIRATION



HOOKING THE FOREST

BY SUSAN L. FELLER

I remember my grandfather helping me up a tree. I peered into a robin's nest and discovered the splendor of blue eggs. That same tree introduced me to cicadas as they shed their shells. I remember listening to adults talk outside of my hideaway under the long willow branches. I was sad when the tree, my friend, was cut down decades later after its roots had wrapped around the water pipes to the house.

Chestnut Leaves, framed to 24" x 24"; variety of yarns, threads, and wool strips, on linen; upholstery samples and cottons, with wires fused between to bend and accent. Designed and created by Susan L. Feller, Augusta, West Virginia, 2018.



Virginia Creeper, framed to 24" x 24".
Hand-dyed wool with wire attached to manipulate into leaf shapes, hand stitched on hooked wool; appliquéd batik cotton; embroidered accents. Designed and created by Susan L. Feller, Augusta, West Virginia, 2018.

Our environment definitely influences our creativity, both consciously and subliminally. Trees have been my muse, from the shadows behind and beneath the trees to the leaf shapes.

So often in rug hooking the “background” of a piece is considered less important. We consider what color it will be, and that may be all we think about. Backgrounds can enliven a piece by elevating the motifs or nestling them into the larger work. The direction of hooking (echo or continuous lines), changing values, creative techniques (paint the linen, appliquéd a piece of fabric for the far-off sky) all can add depth. I decided to explore the possibilities.

STUDY #1

Long evening shadows in the field were my first challenge. A huge cluster of drying chestnut leaves, dropped off the

tree intact, caught my eye and became the pattern. I decided on a 16" square for each leaf design, capturing the life-size shapes. (A square seems to be my go-to shape for studies. I used the 5" size in my book *Design Basics for Rug Hookers* and for my daily sketches in a yearlong study (ArtWools.com/Year-Study).

Yellows are the sunlight and greens are the shadows. With hook in hand and a pile of materials, the linear ground evolved, row by row, until the leaf shapes were left. I owned a huge pile

of upholstery samples—a perfect source for textures and colors. I figured out how to create crinkled leaves: I ironed fusing interfacing with metal wire between the two fabrics. Now I could shape the leaves, and each leaf was stitched into the hooked design.

STUDY #2

Diagonal shadows and Virginia creeper vines with the sky peeking through were the challenge. I had a perfect brown and a robin egg blue batik (the batik even had leaf shapes). I used quilting, embroidery, hooking, and appliquéd. The leaves were cut from a collection of casserole-dyed wools. Again, using iron-on fusing fabric to hide wire under each leaf, and embroidering details, I mimicked the originals,



Pawpaw Leaves, framed to 24" x 24". Various appliqué and embroidery techniques.
 Designed and created by Susan L. Feller, Augusta, West Virginia, 2019.

positioning them over the surface. I bent thicker copper wire into two stems, poking one end into the linen, bending to attach, and then stitching.

STUDY #3

Pawpaw leaves turn bright yellow, then age into golden browns. I used eucalyptus-stained cotton from Australian artist Yvonne Dalton. It was overstitched with

scrap threads contributed by fellow West Virginian Wendy Clark. One panel will be a piece of thin maple veneer, accenting the wooden pattern. The new technique I used this time was cutting, bending, and attaching a recycled beer can (with a technique I learned from Merideth Young from West Virginia, who makes upcycled jewelry). Attaching the veneer strip is holding up the completion of this piece.

The kantha-stitched lines depicting wood grain and mottled values on the cotton contrast with the very dark, straight hooked lines.

STUDY #4

The fourth study is an all-over light background made of cotton and wool triangles forming a traditional quilt pattern. Layering wool is more forgiving



Maple Leaves, framed to 24" x 24". Hand-dyed cotton and wool on linen; upholstery fabric, embroidery, and wire attached to fabric to manipulate. Designed and created by Susan L. Feller, Augusta, West Virginia, 2018.

and easier than precise quilting. I decided to use an amazing hand-dyed wool panel by Pris Buttler that had hung in my studio for years waiting to be used in the right project. The maple leaves came to life with her wonderfully colored striations, some carefully placed embroidery, and more wires. (The wire came from master jewelry artist Christine Keller, along with tips on bending the wire.) Not a loop was pulled on the *Maple Leaves*, but I had lots of fun in its making.

Trees in our Woods, 74" x 32" (mounted on stretcher bars), finished for gallery presentation, #4- to 8-cut hand-dyed and as-is wool on linen. Appliqué with embroidery. Designed and created by Susan L Feller, Augusta, West Virginia, 2019.



TREES IN OUR WOODS

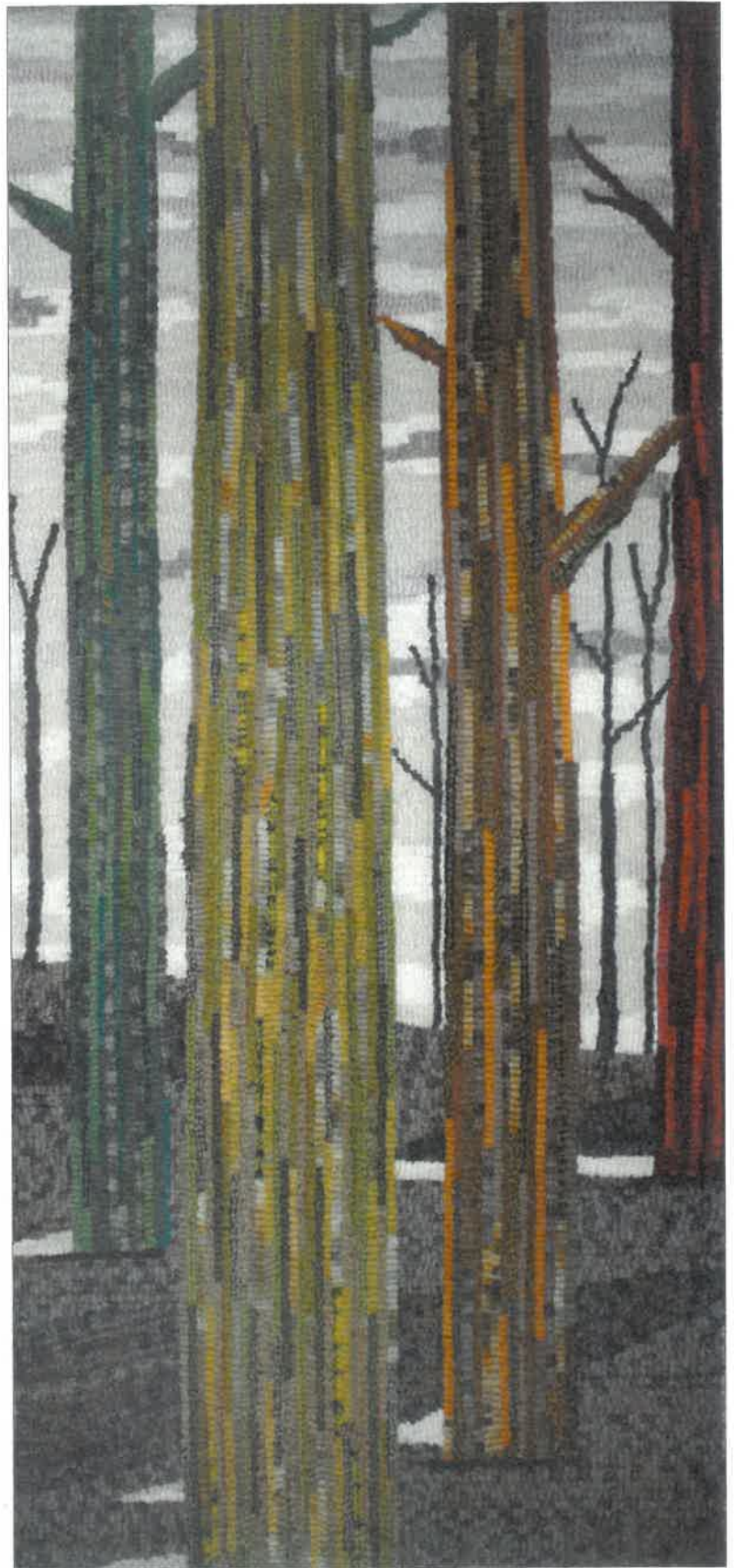
These studies prepared me for a huge project. *Trees in our Woods* is 74" x 32". The scene is right from our property; the leaf-strewn floor would be the challenge. But first came the fun of making the trees realistic, casting shadows on the ground. In the largest tree (an oak), there are 21



different wools. Each tree has some of these fabrics, combined with a new collection, identifying each as deeper in the scene, lit or in shadow. The sky and distant woods are worked in embroidery and appliqué.

For ground cover, I separated a plaid into light, dark, and medium piles, and added a few solid wools in those values. The light sections were hooked using a geometric pattern: two loops straight, turn 90 degrees, hook two more. This pattern was reversed in each section, leading our eye back into the piece.

The shadow shapes include orange-toned wools with some loops pulled higher and cut to add texture. Because the sky is appliquéd, the entire piece needed to be mounted on stretcher bars to be suitable for gallery display and ready in time to be included in a major show: West Virginia Invitational Exhibitions at Juliet Art Museum, Clay Center, Charleston, West Virginia.



Color in My Trees, 17" x 36", #6-cuts on linen. Hand-dyed and as-is wools. Mounted on stretcher bars, finished for gallery presentation. Designed and created by Susan L. Feller, Augusta, West Virginia, 2019.



Seneca Rocks #3,

12" x 16", various cuts of wool fabric, appliqué, embroidery, and acrylic paint on linen. Designed and hooked by Susan L. Feller, 2018.

When I want to portray my home state of West Virginia, trees always appear in the design. Seneca Rocks is an outcropping of Tuscarora quartzite, visible from the valley floor and attracting rock climbers from around the country. The image invites you to travel the path I hiked. The trail has many switchbacks before you reach a viewing platform. From there, the experts continue on to the top, and we watch them from our perch in the park 900 feet below. What a challenge it was to convey the trail, the forest, and the height of the cliffs in this small design.



Trees in Our Woods, detail: background with forest leaves

TREES IN OUR WOODS, REDUX

I enjoyed this design so much I reduced the size by half, to 32" x 16", and hooked it again. Using a fall palette, I call it *Color in My Trees*. This time I used a wide range of textures, combining them to depict bark, hooked in straight lines.

Never satisfied, I have reduced the pattern once again in half and am working on a version with mixed media. And next will be an even smaller design, totally embroidered. I also hooked a purse that I carried to the opening reception and even created some 3" x 2" hooked pins.

I now have more than two dozen pieces that fit my tree theme, and the number is "growing" (pun intended). For me, it is always the trees. **RHM**

Susan L. Feller is the author of Design Basics for Rug Hookers. She lives and creates in West Virginia, networking with regional artists while serving on the Tamarack Foundation for the Arts board. Follow Susan at ArtWools.com, social media sites Instagram, Facebook, and Pinterest