

# THE WEAVER CRAFTSMAN IN THE CONTEMPORARY SCENE

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**A**LTHOUGH the revival of handicrafts in the United States has reached a point where it may definitely be called a renaissance, there is still no reason to be surprised that, to a large section of the public, handweaving is still considered a "lost art." With constant emphasis on the development of mass production techniques, it seems almost impossible for many persons to realize that every day more and more people, women as well as men, follow the craft as a profession. Many more, from kindergartners to businessmen, are seeking to learn how to use looms and yarns. There is also a greater demand for instruction upon schools, colleges, and recreation centers.

This is true in spite of the fact that so many aspects and characteristics of craftsmanship, as well as the beliefs and way of life of the craftsman, are so far from conformity with the contemporary creed that stresses speed and volume of production above else. The worker's time, according to this program, is valued only by the monetary return from the products which he may have had only a small part in producing.

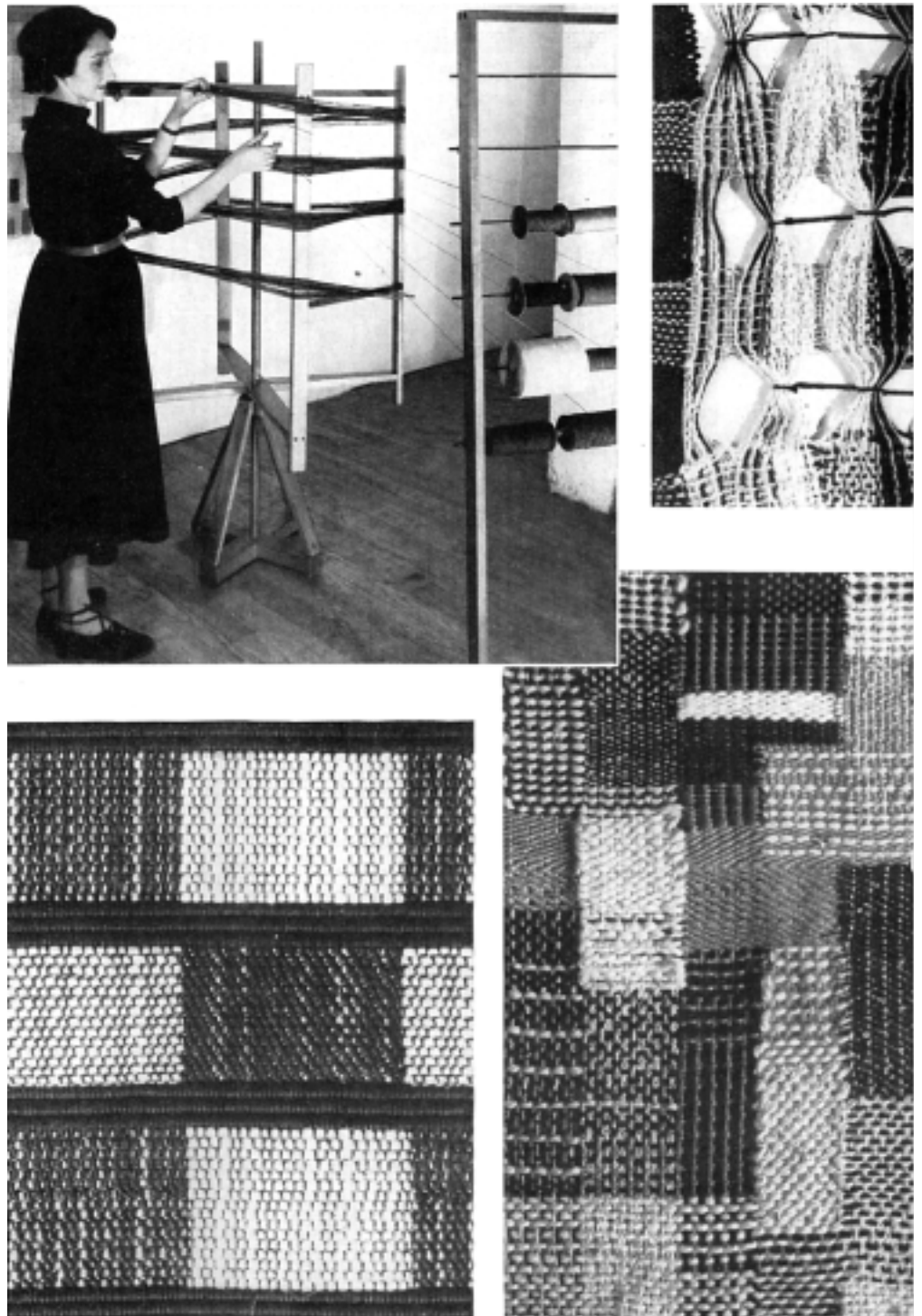
It is true that weaving is time-consuming, beginning with the time which must be spent in education, especially if the training is purely professional. The period of preparation preceding actual

production requires time because the creative craftsman is also the planner and producer, differing from factory workers who function in neither capacity as a whole. The craftsman has the responsibility from the very beginning for the planning and production, the design as well as the execution of his

work, which he is willing and eager to take. This further differentiates him from the person who has neither the courage for nor is aware of the need for personal responsibility in a job.

Many good contemporary craftsmen have come from the ranks of those who

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Upper Right—Experiment with twisted thread which could be developed as a wall hanging, in cotton and rayon, varied colors.

Lower Right—Experiment in tapestry weaving. Both designed and woven by Ernest Ziegfeld, student at Teachers College, Columbia University.

Upper Left—Miss Blumenau making a warp in her studio.

Lower Left—Upholstery fabric, mixture of plain and twill weaves, in black and white. Designed and woven by Miss Blumenau. Photographs by Rudy Bleston.

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have become aware of a need for greater participation in their jobs. Weaving, whether it is employed as a profession or a leisure time activity, offers to many of these dissatisfied people a sense of proper functioning both in relation to themselves and the community. Because in weaving or in other crafts they are using their talents and abilities, employing their senses in a progressive and productive way, they naturally become more important and satisfactory persons, both to themselves and others. They have at last moved out of the spectator class and have become active participants in a productive activity.

Moreover, the first task of the craftsman is the creation of beautiful and useful objects. With this purpose before him, how can he prefer speed, speed which too often results in the destruction of creative ideas and places the emphasis on mechanical and imitative work. Although most craftsmen sell the greatest part of their work, the monetary consideration must be the last for them.

At present there is also a greater appreciation not only of the values of the craftsman's work but of the craftsman as a person, an awareness of the importance of that certain delight or excitement which the craftsman derives from creating and executing his work and that man derives from the enjoyment of his products.

The craftsman especially recognizes that he cannot follow accepted ideas; he reexamines and he selects what he needs for his work and the development of his life, because his work is an important part of his life. It is in this process of searching for the thing he needs, that he finds a certain delight, a peculiar happiness, known to few outside the field.

One seldom finds an indifferent craftsman; he feels deeply about the quality of his work, if only concerning the technical aspects necessary for sound execution. Not all craftsmen are originators or designers, but all can strive for original design and good technique.

It is when the craftsman is functioning to the fullest extent, as the starter

and the searcher, that he finds the greatest reward growing out of both the struggle and the love for his work. The craftsman and the artist find the excitement within their work which many others must look for outside their regular tasks. Unfortunately too many people today have lost a great quality of the craftsman, the child-like attitude of listening and searching, the great curiosity about how things are done and the joy in the exploration and adventure of doing them.

Most of the fundamental principles and needs I have mentioned which make the craftsman a more alive person, vitally interested in both the creative and technical aspects of his work, are missing often in certain traditional weaving. There is still a romantic trend toward repeating the designs of the past, a procedure which is never creative nor educational.

Let us now go direct to the work of the weaver and see what his basic principles are, both technical and artistic. The basic principles in weaving begin with the yarns, the raw materials, such as wool, cotton, silk, linen and many synthetics. These have to be studied both from scientific and esthetic points of view. For instance we gain knowledge in studying the wool fiber's properties and how wool acts in the weaving process. Wool is often fuzzy, requires greater care in handweaving than, for instance, mercerized cotton. One of the characteristics of wool is its softness. We use wool in our design in contrast to silk which is shiny and sleazy.

Cotton is not only cotton, a common, everyday yarn. It can be used to produce dull surfaces and beautiful textures, either alone or in combination with other fibers, if its possibilities are thoroughly explored. Texture, moreover, is not achieved only by using nubby yarn on a loom; it is produced through weave constructions and different kinds of yarns, using varying techniques. Beautiful textures can be developed from among plain yarns with the proper weave. Rough and smooth yarns, in fact all opposites in combination, have interesting qualities.

Of further importance in creative work is the point of emphasis, or a contrast of balance, such as lustrous or dull

surfaces, rough or smooth textures. All this will teach the student how to use adequately the unlimited numbers of yarns. Here the beginner must take an experimental attitude, expecting failure as well as success. He must not be upset by technical difficulties. When a thread breaks for him, he can remind himself that threads break for the most skillful weaver.

Also among the weaver's basic principles are the weaves themselves, fundamentally the interlacing of horizontal and vertical sets of yarns in right angles. The process begins with one of the elementary weaves such as the plain, which is like mending, and develops into the more complicated weave constructions. All elementary weaves such as plain, twill, and satin must be thoroughly mastered. The craftsman can

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then go on to the creation of his own design, using his imagination and skill, and freeing himself from the tendency to copy old patterns. Of course the study of old textiles is very desirable; here we gain knowledge as well as inspiration.

Still another important factor to be considered in our work is color. Not only the study of dyes, but the combinations of color and the color changes in the interlacing process. This all requires alertness and complete absorption in order to develop and to gain in our work.

The response in us which we develop and gain through knowledge of and working with the materials, the choice of yarns, the weaves, the colors, will be later expressed in our finished product. The loom is only the tool, the means to an end, which is the woven fabric.

The person who takes up textiles as a profession should have an artistic and technical education simultaneously, equally balanced. Technical training does not deaden creativeness. On the contrary, creative expression in its finest form grows out of this thorough knowledge of materials and processes. Often the weaver has to recognize the limitations in his work. Sometimes he has found something extraordinarily good from the creative point of view; unless he considers it also from the viewpoint of technical limitations and sound craftsmanship, he may fail in his final production.

The technical part of the weaver's education should as far as possible be equal to that of a textile technician, including weave constructions, raw materials, analysis, dyeing and calculations. He must never forget that he cannot be an artist in weaving without the skill of the craftsman. But neither is craftsmanship alone enough for the artist-weaver; to the intuitive sense of the born artist must be added the training necessary to develop his natural gifts. • • •