



*Photograph by CLARA SIPPRELL*

# EDITH HUNTINGTON SNOW

## Weaver, Artist, Craftsman

By LOUISE LLEWELLYN JARECKA

The result of this successful demonstration was that Edith Snow, responding to the request of a group of eminent medical men of the National Association of Occupational Therapy, opened a school for convalescents and neurotics. In the autumn of 1921 she took the studio on the top floor of the Art Center at 65 East 56th Street, New York City, with a friend and partner, Miss Beatrice Vail Abbott. The Snow Abbott Looms had the endorsement of such scientists as Doctors Foster Kennedy, Austin Fox Riggs, Alexander Lambert, Ray Lyman Wilbur, Theodore J. Abbott, Doctors Tilney, Salmon and Hart. Besides the patients of these doctors, came student nurses and chiefs of Occupational Therapy from the hospitals, and counsellors from the health camps to hear the talks on better design and to find the solutions to such problems as how to utilize one warp for all sorts of weaving, covering up with gaily colored wefts the commonest cotton

STYLE," remarked the great French architect, Auguste Perret, "is a word that has no plural." Perret thought it all wrong to refer to "styles" in architecture, in sculpture, in painting. His remark applies just as well to all the arts. What matters about any form of any branch of art in the last analysis is whether it has style—a style of its own. And this it may have, even though it be a synthesis of periods and origins or an individual improvisation. Applying this test to the art of weaving, no better example could be found to illustrate the point than the work of Edith Huntington Snow. An artist now practiced and experienced, trained in the studios of the Flambeau Weavers in New York City, for ten years teacher and director of her own New York studio, the Snow Abbott Looms, later the Snow Looms, it was quite unexpectedly that she came to the loom.

In her school days she had been educated to paint pictures which accounts perhaps for her peculiar skill in the handling of color. But it was the craft of weaving that brought her back to health after an illness, and she learned its value first as an aid to convalescence. Miss Snow was one of the first to teach weaving as occupational therapy. After the completion of her technical training and teaching apprenticeship at Flambeau Weavers, she was invited by Dr. Herbert J. Hall, then a top American neurologist and director of the Marblehead, Massachusetts, Sanatorium, to join the lecture course there and observe the effect of the practical application upon his patients. Among them were many disabled veterans from World War I, and in one summer she saw the boys adjust their reluctant legs to the rhythm of the pedal movements and strengthen their partly atrophied muscles on the mechanism of the looms. She witnessed their joy at the discovery of a new and creative occupation.

*"Sailors Take Warning." Small wall piece of modern silk tapestry in lively colors and design. Woven at The Snow Looms. Exhibited at the New York World's Fair.*



# FINE LINENS

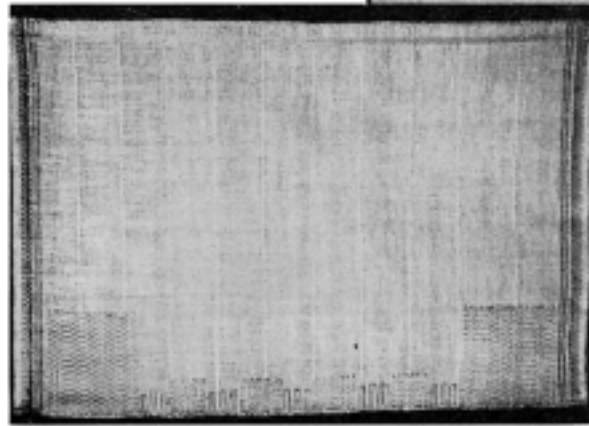
Designed and Woven by  
EDITH HUNTINGTON SNOW

Place Mats Representative of her Table Sets, described in Detail  
on the Following Pages

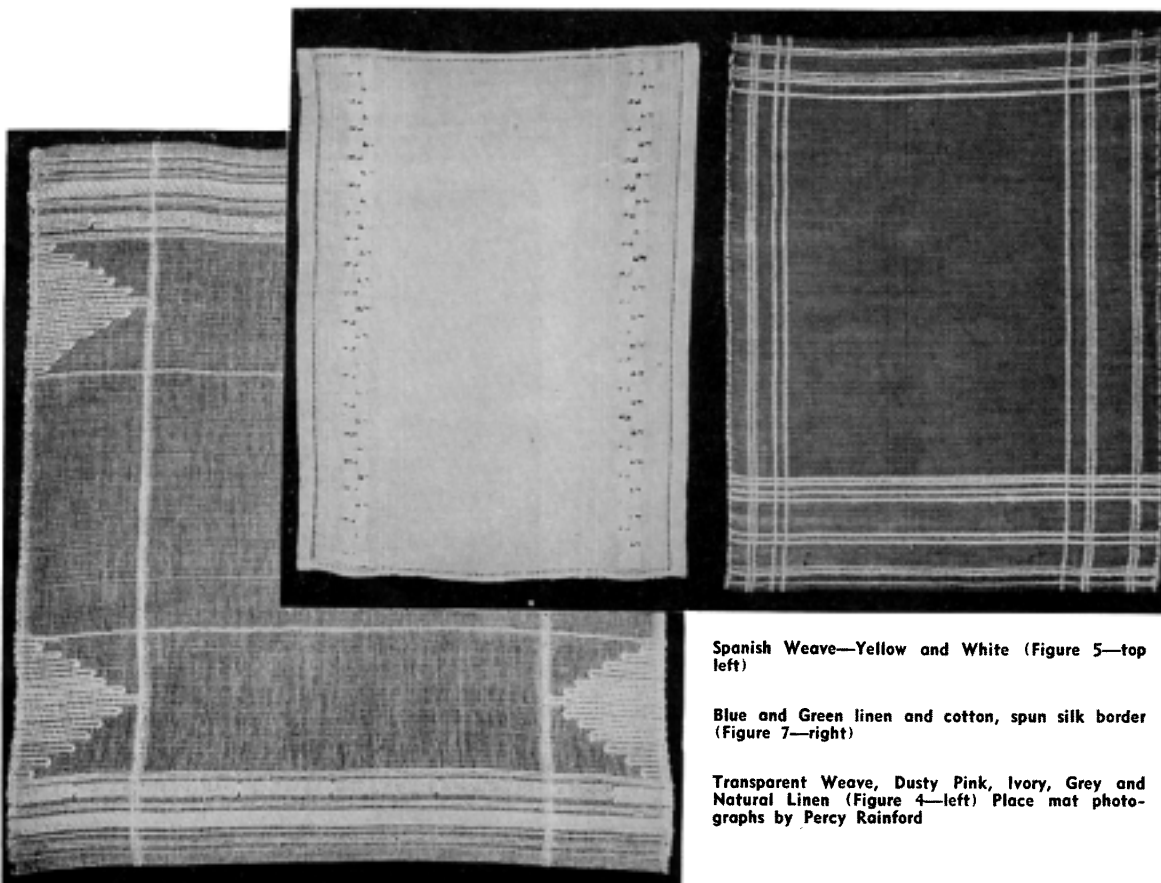
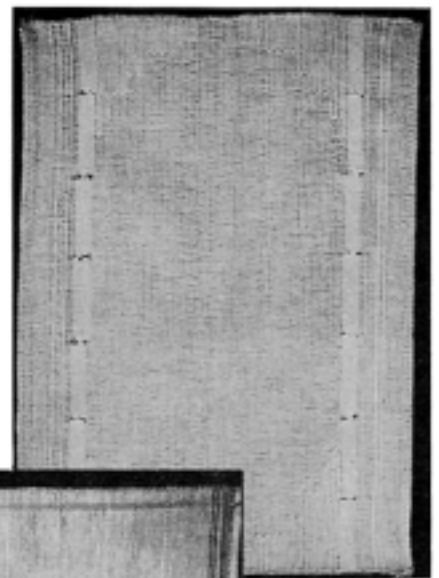


Table Runner—Egyptian in Effect (Figure 1)

"Laid in" Design, Natural Linen  
Cord, Grey Weft, Natural and  
Grey Homespun Warp (Figure 3)



Colorful Rayon and Linen Set—Apricot, Orange, and Magenta on Pink  
linen warp. Woven in an ordered, rhythmical pattern of lines and  
squares, it was planned as a foil for modern glass and a china service  
in the same design. (Figure 6)



Spanish Weave—Yellow and White (Figure 5—top  
left)

Blue and Green linen and cotton, spun silk border  
(Figure 7—right)

Transparent Weave, Dusty Pink, Ivory, Grey and  
Natural Linen (Figure 4—left) Place mat photo-  
graphs by Percy Rainford

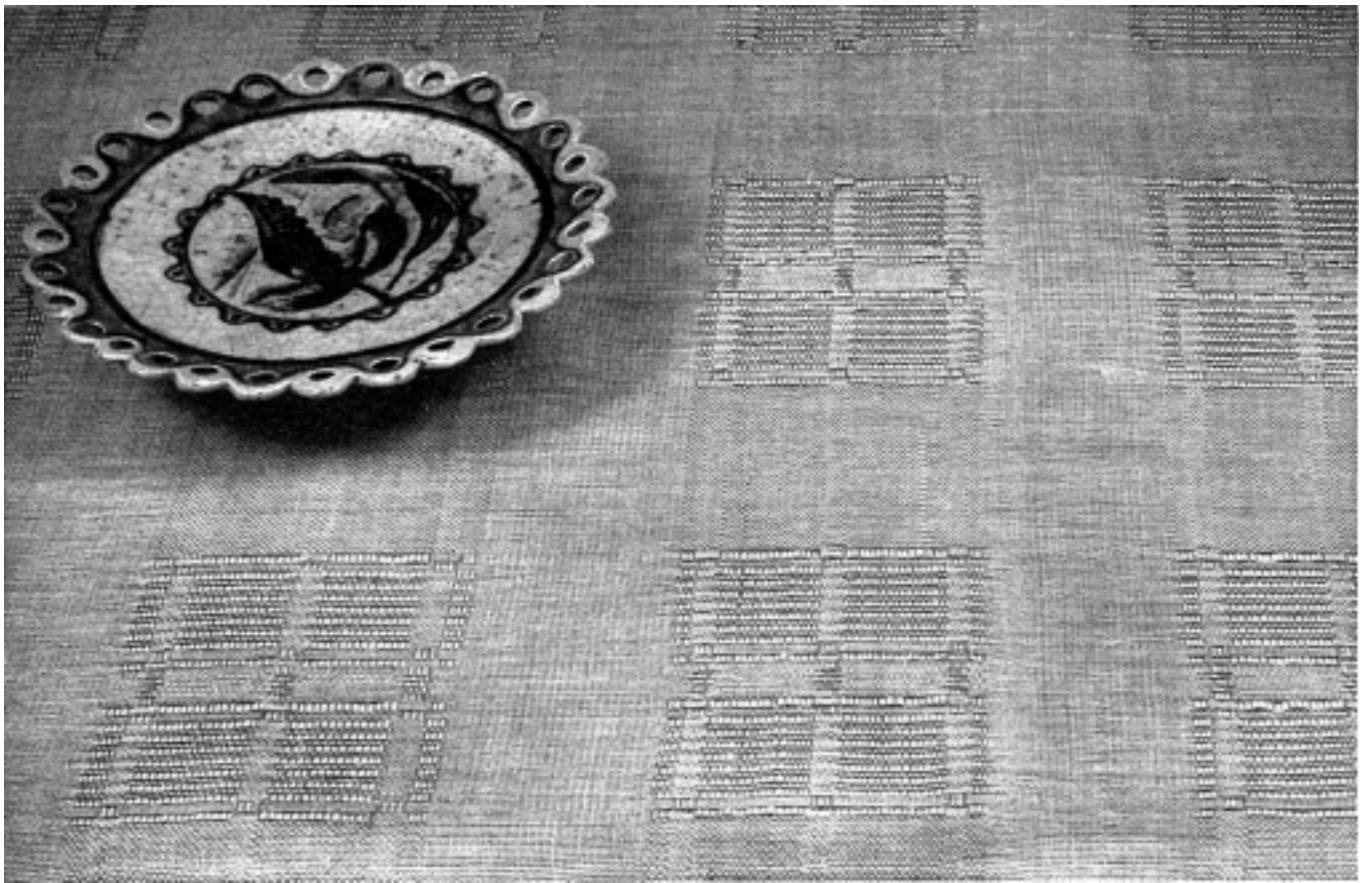


Figure 2 Lunch cloth, Irish Linen and American Homespun—Pottery by Henry Varnum Poor.

Photograph by JANE ROGERS

strands. The ranks of nervous and mental patients and all those who came in ill and walked out with a new and healthy interest in life, were filled in with apprentices and craftsmen studying for pleasure or profession. For the directors were members of the Art Alliance in high standing and of the New York Society of American Craftsmen.

Handsome textiles lined the walls; and the massed color of dyed materials caught the glint of the sun at different angles as the day wore on. It was a rare oasis of ordered beauty and peace in the midst of a city's grime and confusion. Doctors often sent members of their own families. One of them enrolled his wife who had lost her two children in one week and had broken down mentally from grief. She had to be taught privately, watched and kept away from windows or from any object that might be destructively used. She could not bear the sight of her husband at first or any one who reminded her of the old home life. But gradually she succumbed to the new game of heddles, harness and shuttle play and one bright day a short time after her dismissal she dashed in with a little loom under her arm to ask for teachers to help her start a school of weaving for mill hands in the suburb where their home was located.

When Miss Abbott retired she was succeeded in the partnership by Laura Peasley, who contributed her own original research and skill. The Snow Looms, as the organization was known thereafter, marked an epoch in American craftsmanship. Seeking no publicity, they had an excellent press. Columns of appreciation were accorded them in leading dailies and other periodicals. Weaving as a cure geared to

weaving as a craft was an idea that was new and highly constructive. Meanwhile Miss Snow found time to travel extensively in Europe, pausing long to absorb the elements of technique and design in France and the Scandinavian countries, where weaving has an ancient and noble tradition. Practical experience and sensitive observation accompanying an innate sense of elegance never to be betrayed, must explain to a degree Edith Snow's beautiful table sets, which rank certainly as classics of American weaving.

Many a craftsman was set on the way she should go while working at the Snow looms: old Colonial instruments with their single measurements and overhead beaters, good modern floor looms, small table looms propelled by foot and by hand, the small Egyptian card loom, two, four, six and eight harness looms for the threaded pattern weaves, and the less complicated two-shed looms on which a clever weaver could produce embroidery weaves, stripes, checks and tapestry as well as with the four harness set-up. The studio turned out draperies, dress materials, couch and cushion covers, runners and chair seats, bags and belts. Miss Snow was one of the first to insist, as do the Cranbrook Weavers today, upon the all important principle of relation of material to design and the use to which the fabric is to be put, and the affinities between different designs and colors. Preparation and use of natural dyes were a part of the course. "Craftsmen are wonderful to work with," says Miss Snow. "They are not copyists, but good craftsmen always pass on their secrets. Each one works out an individual style, usually quite different from what has been taught. They learn cheer-



Design from Alaskan Eskimo Boot

fully by their mistakes and run across new ideas by accident. The materials too suggest original designs."

She herself found a way, through studying the age-long history of design, to her own creative interpretations, combinations and arrangements. Occasionally she reproduces an ancient pattern such as the decorative sequence she found on an Alaskan Eskimo boot in the Museum of Natural History. The Smithsonian Institution bid for the table scarf she bordered with an adaptation of this motif, but it had already gone into the private collection of Miss Mary Kissell of Columbia University. Although her fabrics represent a wide range of materials: linen, wool, cotton, silk, mercerized cotton, rayon, Miss Snow is an aristocrat in her sense of selection. Metallic and tinsel threads, she considers, must be employed with great discrimination, not to cheapen the aspect of a textile; and the indiscriminate use of a material that has not yet been proved washable, she rejects as bad craftsmanship. Like a sense of color to a painter—and indeed to a weaver as well—the textile sense is something congenital. A weaver either has it or has not. If she has not, then she must be guided in the selection of materials by a specialist. There are many new stuffs on the market now, offering adventure to the intrepid and to the ingenious—and almost as many dangers. For there are no fixed rules. Good taste is like absolute pitch. The influence of environment helps, but does not always breed it.

Within the last fifty years handweaving has come again into its own as an industry, in which it becomes more and more necessary to design and reproduce quickly. "But there are still individual weavers," says Miss Snow, "who prefer to make individual compositions for special orders, special people and special purposes." Their approach is the same as to any other art. Each piece has its own character. It is then that weaving becomes an art, like painting or musical composition. No two people weave alike; but to Miss Snow every sort of weaving possesses its own quality, beauty and purpose from tapestries and rugs to table sets and towels. There is no hierarchy in kind. There is only good technique, good design and—that all important and elusive—*style*.

Asked what material she prefers among all the stuffs she has handled Miss Snow confessed: "I always return to linen." And if she may be said to have a specialty, it is the weaving of the most distinguished table sets this writer has been privileged to see either here or abroad. Each one of these sets is different. It is hard for her to repeat or imitate even her own work. The next is sure to introduce some variation however slight. There exists of course nothing *new*, but there is infinite *renewal* in design; and so art never needs to stop, once it finds the channel. Somewhere in Europe the peasants have named their flowing embroidery sequences "little rivers." Geometrical patterns, of which Miss Snow makes constant use, run into the infinite. Though composed of the same elements, they are susceptible of endless variation according to the way in which these elements are combined. Geometrical and abstract designs came first; for men drew the rhythms they felt before they drew the objects they saw. And so these rhythms seem to retain a sort of hypnotic and eternal charm for us; and this is perhaps why there is a fascination in reducing natural objects like birds, plants, animals and men to conventionalized forms, resolving them into parts of an unending calculus.

The stylized birds with the chalice (Fig. 1) on one of Miss Snow's table runners, an adaptation from a famous old fabric in Chartres Cathedral, are happily balanced, with their spread wings indicated by two straight lines of different lengths and density. For this Miss Snow made use of a fine Irish linen threading for warp and weft. She obtained a filmy lightness by using 18 very fine warp threads to the inch, and crossing them with a linen floss unevenly spun which gives a handspun look. The dainty runner keeps its crispness after laundering and does not pull out of shape.

In appearance it recalls the fine linens of ancient Egypt and also old pieces found only a few years ago in Polesie, a province occupied by an aboriginal Slavonic tribe, separating the Soviets from eastern Poland. These fabrics were of a cobwebby texture that could be drawn through a finger ring.

The square lunch cloth, (Fig. 2) combines all the best features of the craft: the choice of material—a glossy, twisted Irish linen warp spun under water, crossed with Colonial American homespun—the classical design achieved on a six harness loom, showing to its best advantage in the cool tint of the natural linen. Such a composition as this could be worked out only by an artist of intuition with a profound knowledge of the cult of weaving. (A large quantity of this

homespun yarn was given to Miss Snow by a friend, who found a trunkful in her attic, where it had been placed in colonial times.)

The same may be said of the one-tone table set (Fig. 3) woven for a modern dinner service, with weft of the chaste, natural color linen alternating with grey homespun 20 threads to the inch on a fine twisted warp, 36 threads to the inch. The elaborate but beautifully formalized pattern is "laid in" over the grey weft with natural color linen cord. The weave has a lightness and elegance in appearance contrasting with its actual weight and flatness which convey a sense of comfortable permanence as it lies on the table. In these two pieces of work Miss Snow has reached a superlative of refinement and skill worthy of comparison with the best in all periods.

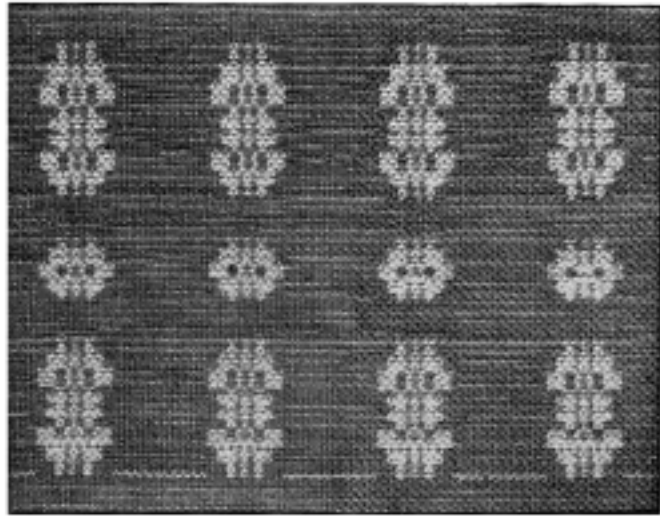
Scarcely less felicitous is the dainty square set of transparent weave (Fig. 4). It is produced of a dusty pink linen warp forming squares with heavier warp threads of ivory. The weft is of alternating grey and natural color linen, while the design of decorative and plain stripes, cross bars and serrated triangles in each corner is introduced with heavy threads laid over the plain weave.

Very luxurious in effect is the Spanish weave of heavy twisted white linen let into a plain weave of pale, corn yellow on a natural linen warp. (Fig. 5). A lovely color harmony is obtained in the rayon table set (Fig. 6) by the use of apricot, orange and a few threads of magenta on a pink linen warp. The design of decorative stripes and squares



Material for drapery woven on a 5 harness loom, of wash silk in two tones with twisted warp and spun silk weft. Exhibited at "Lanier" last summer with the Scheier pottery.

is ordered and extremely rhythmical. This was intended as a foil for modern glass and a china service repeating the same design.



Double weave in contrasting colors of wool yarns, suitable for upholstery. Pale magenta on deep lilac. Reversible.

The blue and green breakfast set (Fig. 7) designed for a pewter service is simplicity itself—simplicity born of science and sophistication. On a fine, beige mercerized cotton warp (20 pearl and 16 threads to the inch) are crossed the weft threads of linen, two green alternating with two blue, gently but firmly beaten. A broad border is created by stripes of heavy spun silk in irregular sequences. The vibration of green and blue lends the fabric the effect almost of a changeable silk in the light. This practical set requires the minimum amount of finishing and washes perfectly.

Color, now exhilarating, now dusky and sober, form, quality and style bore irrefutable testimony to the achievements of Edith Snow last August at the Lanier Craft Barn, Eliot, Maine, where an exhibition was shown of her textiles combined with Scheier pottery. These American ceramics, subtle in tone, graphically expert and magnificently modelled—especially the large, shallow bowls and plaques—rested becomingly upon the soft silks and linens. Indeed these splendid examples of the two most ancient arts of man seemed to lend a final grace each to the other.

During the last two years of the corporate existence of the Snow looms, Miss Snow and Miss Peasley published their book: *Weaving For Hand Looms*. A new edition of this work has recently been brought out and will be found of great use to students unable to obtain studio instruction, and who are seeking to master the fundamentals of the craft.

Miss Snow grew up in Lawrence, Kansas, where her father, Francis F. Snow, was chancellor of the University of Kansas, of which he had been co-founder. She received her education there, taking special courses in literature and in the School of Fine Arts of the University. A short period of study followed at Leland Stanford University, California, before she came to New York to perfect herself in the skill of weaving. She has received high recognition in France and of course in her own country where Snow weaves stand as classics of American traditional art. • • •