

# CONTEMPORARY POLISH WEAVING

By LOUISE LLEWELLYN JARECKA

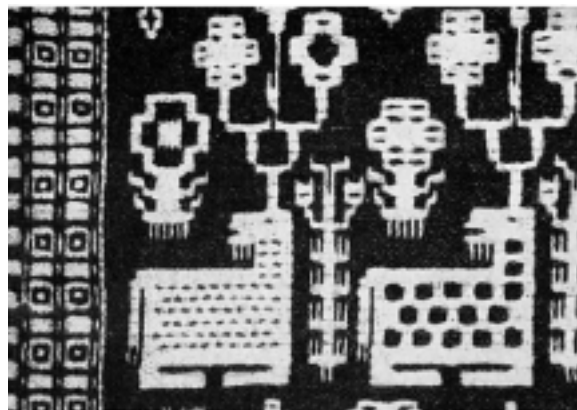
THE DAY OF THE craftsman in modern Europe began when intelligent folk came all at once to the realization that since the Middle Ages, when artist and craftsman were one indivisible body, an artificial hierarchy had grown up. This separation of artist and craftsman had worked to the detriment of all art in the XIXth century.

It was then that the nations' poets and prophets spoke up. There were Ruskin and William Morris in England. But even before them there was Norwid in Poland. His statements on the subject and his intense earnestness acted as a spur, when at length they were perceived, to a succeeding generation of artists and writers. He said a great many wise things bearing upon the significance of a people's culture. This in substance was one of them: "The inheritance and capital of a nation lie not only in the geographical situation of the land, its climatic conditions, the brawn of its arms and the blood of the race, but in the ability to employ its materials. Harmony dwells in the relation between the quality of imagination and the power to shape the material at hand."

Norwid was a member of the great Poland-to-Paris emigration in the forties and moved in a brilliant circle of poets, painters and musicians, including Chopin, Mickiewicz, the "national poet," Delacroix, the French painter, Berlioz, and many other famous artists who had kept the faith. Conversing with a friend at one of their gatherings, he remarked: "Art has lost its channel. As it is now practiced it is unnecessary. But in spite of this it exists, which is the proof that it is necessary."

That his words have been taken with seriousness by his own people is now evident in the tremendous movement in Poland toward the grass roots of the arts—those of the country's earliest traditions, practiced and perfected by the humble and the unlearned. The present generation of successful Polish artists and craftsmen set out, while students in the art academies, to study conditions under which art was still living and vital in the Golden Age.

In those days every artist was a craftsman. He did not buy his colors at the store. While working as an apprentice to the master, he learned to make them by rubbing the dyes



*Stag motif from rug woven on Bialystok peasant looms, directed by Eleanora Plutynska, a weaver in her own right.*

with his own hands, or how to slack the lime for the frescoes if he was to do murals. He had to go through a long, technical preparation in the medium itself before he was allowed even to start the actual painting. He had to learn to understand the simplest details of his medium, and out of that profound understanding of the materials grew his conception of the forms they were best adapted to shape and the use to which they could be put. Weavers bred their sheep and grew their flax. They knew how the wool should be sheared and washed, how to spin it and dye it and spread it on the loom, how to wash and dry the flax and hemp, how to beat it and spin the soft fiber into thread. There were not two kinds of art, then, the "high" and the low.

While XIXth century artists of the academies were slowly cutting themselves off from the accumulated wisdom of the past—following fashions and currents of the moment and depending upon ready and commercially prepared materials—out in the country, far from urban snobbism, skills continued to be handed down from father or mother to son and daughter, who kept on making their own tools, preparing their own materials. Their paint brushes were from the hairs of cows' tails, the finer ones from dogs' or cats' hairs or from oxen's eyelashes. The materials, the tools, and how to use them in order to give a suitable form to those materials, in keeping with their natural character, these three things were the basis of a great art principle. Stone, wood, metal, flax, wool, silk each possessed its own property which in the fashioning offered a certain resistance to be overcome by the sensitive hand of the creator with the simplest or the most complicated utensils. These artists by tradition knew better than to try to make out of one material what they could make better and more easily from another of a different nature. They knew that they could not decorate a pot in the same way they would carve a box nor weave a rug the way they would paint a Madonna. Each object had to be composed with its own tools and conceived in terms of its own materials. Paintings were not born on looms nor fabrics on easels or on paper.

Weaving was always a by-product of agriculture and, except for embroidery, an occupation usually assigned to the

daughters of the house. It was one of the chief concerns and industries of the Polish peasant woman. She wove the towels, often adorned by the young girls with lovely embroidered sequences, she wove the blouses, the aprons, belts and bags of different sorts for the family, and in some provinces even the woolen skirts. And when the family necessities were taken care of, she sat at the loom making runners for the floor, of heavy hempen thread sometimes mixed with straw, blankets for winter, saddle pads for the horses and finally fabrics to adorn the house. Until quite recently all these things were made at home in practically every Polish province.

Different colors, designs and types of weaving were and are still found in the different regions, and these variations too were a matter of inherited tradition. Stripes were preferred here, checks there, and in another place rhombs and zigzags, angles, squares and circles. Most weavers used the horizontal loom, but in the Southeast they built up their pure woolen rugs on the upright frames and called it weaving "on the harp."

In the northeastern provinces the traditional weave resembles closely that of our Colonial bedspreads. The regional textiles are of linen or cotton, often with a warp of wool. The yarns or threads are dyed in different colors

and sometimes combined with the natural grey or beige linen, and a great deal of black is used.

The thinner weaves are employed for towels and tablecloths. For these the linen is bleached and mangled to a lustrous, metallic polish, almost like damask. It is then woven into geometrical patterns. Slightly heavier than Irish table linen and usually not more than 27 inches in width, it makes extremely effective table runners. Nothing could be prettier than a table for four, set with two of these runners crossing one another. The most attractive color combinations are a silvery cherry with greyish white or the blending of two tones of white. Patterns and colors are so varied that a well-known ethnologist gathered more than seven hundred examples of *radiuszki*, as they are called, no two of which were alike.

Those mixed with wool are used to cover beds, benches and chests, and to lay over the straw lining of the peasant wagons, and to soften the seats. They are used also to cover the day-beds and cushions of city folk and for upholstery in modern apartments. This type of weaving is common to all the Baltic states: Latvia, Esthonia and Lithuania, as well as to northern Poland.

The creativeness of the artist does not depend of course

"The Council of Chieftains," wall tapestry by the Galkowskis, wool on linen warp. Below—detail from tapestry.



"Tribal Council," another tapestry by the Galkowskis, using characteristic design.

upon intellectual development, but upon other human qualities. While the chief desire of the scientific researcher is to know and to understand the enigma of existence, the artist's direct reaction to it is emotional or inspirational. His sense of the mystery is reflected in the creation of a beautiful thing, which Norwid called "giving a form to love." It is strange how much love may be expressed in abstractions of form and never-ending rhythms independent of models—for rhythms are felt rather than seen.

There is a distinct tendency in Polish art, especially in the traditional arts, toward geometrical rhythms and decorative sequences. It is an art that seems to derive from an older world than that of the West. The tendency is strong even in the Bialystok rugs, many of which were shown in the recent exhibition of Polish traditional arts that has been touring the country after openings in Washington and New York under the auspices of The American Federation of Arts. These rugs and the tapestries of the Galkowskis to be described are the present-day aristocrats of the Polish looms. The former are products of the peasant weavers under the guidance of Eleanora Plutynska, discoverer of the ancient technique and cult, and now director of the Norwid School of Weaving in Warsaw. And "cult" it was in the beginning. With their runic symbols and stars and their images of earth's fertility, such rugs were a worshipful recognition of the Mystery. Their origin goes back beyond any records of them the earth has yet yielded. Fragments of the looms were found by excavators in a layer of the deposits of 2,500 years ago, but this was certainly long after the first looms of their sort were in use as there are other indications of a far more remote antiquity.

In the weaving of these rugs no attempt was ever made to emulate brush technique or to reproduce objects in a naturalistic way as in the great tapestries of Western Europe. Symbols of ancient deities like the sun and the fish, images of trees, vines, fruits, birds, animals or men, were adapted to the movements of the loom and the character of the materials and were strictly bound up with the technique. These were so stylized and schematic that it is sometimes necessary to look twice before discovering little birds hovering in the systems of branches. Originally nothing appeared in the way of design that had not a definite signification. Its messages were to be read like any hieroglyphic. But as time went on the esoteric meanings were lost, though the weavers continued to use the smaller characters in a decorative way. They called them "little crabs," but turned them into a variety of rosettes, rhombs, posies, crosses, suns, stars, dots and dashes. Although scattered through the field seemingly at random these motifs nevertheless have an effect intensely felt by the intuitive weaver. By contributing an element of caprice and whimsey to the composition they relieve the rigidity of the design.

Bialystok rugs are reversible, woven on a broad, horizontal loom with two warps of contrasting colors. Both warp and weft are of pure wool from the sheep of the region. They are handspun and dyed with natural colors. In a weave of gold and blue, for example, the motif on one side is gold on a blue background, while on the other side the colors



*Eleanora Plutynska weaving a kilim in the traditional manner, improvising her own design.*

are reversed. The field of the rug has the structure of a plain linen weave, but the fabric is double so that, with the fingers, the blue one may be separated from the gold except in places where the ornament is formed by drawing one warp through to the other side. Each color is woven in with a separate pedal and the question of combining warp and weft separately for each side is determined by the manner of treading the pedals and of running in the weft. This is also of two colors, contrasting always with the background. The weaver as he works must pick up the lower warp in those places where the ornament is to appear and where the color from the lower side must penetrate to the upper side and vice versa. Herein lies the whole originality of the technique and the artistic value of these reversible rugs in which the ornament results from the interlacing and crossing of the yarns with little teeth, rhythmical zigzags, lattices and webs. It is the root out of which springs the inventive freedom of the craftsman to shape his motifs.

Unlike the simple *raduski* made in almost every peasant cottage, these reversible carpets and rugs require specialists—not professional artisans but peasants who dedicate to this art of weaving the time not claimed by work in the fields.

The technique is now known only in one or two Polish provinces of the extreme northeast and in certain remote parts of the Scandinavian Peninsula. It is said to be the oldest of all Northern Europe. The rugs were used chiefly for religious and family celebrations, particularly for wedding gifts which became the heirlooms of generations. Often little figures of a man and a girl were woven into the border, symbolizing the young pair. Included also were the beasts with which they were to set up their new establishment and trees to indicate the land they possessed. Rugs of this latter design went by the name of "The Wedding Procession" (Korowod Weselny).

Though folk art, more and more exposed to the process of urbanization, was approaching a partial eclipse—similar to that which the learned arts had suffered in the XIXth century—Eleanora Plutynska, searching in the most isolated village for master weavers, found still in 1934 an art in which the law governing the relationship of the form to the medium had never been forgotten. The so-called high arts had long since begun to totter and fall, yet only then had those of the village been threatened with a breakdown. Happily it was not too late to revive them. Light had dawned in the minds of the few who saw just how much depended upon reaching those grass roots of art at the decisive moment when racial memories were dimmed but not blacked out. Madame Plutynska never found it necessary to dictate forms, patterns and composition nor to teach the people in the sense that pupils coming into a school from various environments are taught. This would in fact have been fatal. Folk artists have their own methods of approach to the problems of form. It is important only to recall and preserve them. "If the way is right," she told them, "the results will be right."

She found that the feeling for the medium was still alive, despite prodigal waste of skill on bad designs such as cupids,

irises and horns of plenty, copied from cheap publications and woven in unbelievably gaudy and vulgar combinations of synthetic color. It was not long before she had a group of women and men composing as of old "from the head"—or as we might say, "by heart"—on the loom while weaving, without model or sketch but merely following the technical possibilities. Design took place simply as a result of them. The "medium" consisted not only of the method of weaving, but also of the right quality of hand-spun wool, suitably heavy and dyed in the correct way—the way that was once accepted in all Europe and that has been proved for centuries in Asia by the finest weavers.

Before 1937, Madame Plutynska's weavers were turning out magnificent rugs for the floor, for wall hangings, couch and day-bed covers, with soft, rich coloring and ordered patterns, adaptable to almost any kind of interior. The industry suffered cruelly from the war in 1939 and the years following. Weavers were enlisted or conscripted, others were murdered or died of exposure. Looms and whole stacks of finished rugs and ready wool were destroyed, flocks were decimated and plundered. One exhausting effort after another was made in 1945 and '46. Finally the work in Bialystok began again to grow and prosper, with the help of a newly organized council of art production formed by another creative woman, Wanda Telakowska, within the frame of the Ministry of Art and Culture.

An enterprise undertaken at the close of World War II was the founding of the State Textile Institute Wanda. Its name is a tribute to the post-war efforts of Telekowska to revive the ancient skills. Here the tapestries are the creations of the two directors, Helena and Stefan Galkowski, talented young graduates of the Fine Arts Academy with enough village background to understand traditional ways. They have also invested in their work a soaring imagination, inherited

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*Reversible rugs from the Bialystok peasant looms, showing use of bird and animal forms in design.*



## CONTEMPORARY POLISH WEAVING

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fantasy, and a deep and unerring graphic sense. Most of the weaving here is done upon the upright loom, like the old *kilims* of the Southeast, a woolen weft crossing a linen warp in a simple, regular weave except that the weft is loosely interlaced with the fingers, unaided by the shuttle, and covers the warp completely. The ornament is drawn with the yarn and not with pencil. It is led in and placed in position, all its possibilities exploited against the resistance offered by the technique. In this way design is crystallized only upon the loom. After this has taken place, the expert weaver sometimes draws a sketch as an aid to memory in the spacing of the motifs. In the final phase when he has possessed himself of the possibilities of the loom, operating it with almost unconscious ease, it is permissible to project a tapestry on paper. But never is the amateur instructed to begin from this. Such was the schooling which has placed the Galkowskis among the great weavers of their time. All the loom work of the Wanda Institute is done by them and the twenty-five employed weavers who are assigned their subjects are allowed considerable freedom of interpretation. The subjects: old tales, legends, fables, historical and biblical episodes, pagan and Christian ceremonies, are inspired largely by folklore.

Galkowski tapestries are beloved of all classes and stand as a proof that there exists no proper hierarchy in art save that of excellence in conception and execution. It is not surprising that they have made a sensation in Europe. Their designers have given an example of what may be accomplished by young artists educated and guided in the right procedure. For they passed their apprenticeship at a time when results of the research of directors and teachers like Eleanora Plutynska and her associates had already penetrated to the art schools and taken effect.

The work of the Galkowskis is in a way the offspring of the *kilims* of the XVIIth, XVIIIth and XIXth centuries when rugs and carpets as beautiful as any ever known were developed on the territory of the old Polish Commonwealth in the Southeast. Kilim history is a story in itself. It had begun to be known and appreciated outside the country only just before World War II. Valuable museum and private collections of the precious rugs were destroyed in those years of conflict and depredation. The weaving principle was the same as that of the Bialystok rugs, although the structural process was different.

In an almost miraculous way Poland has reached back into the past to redeem a culture upon which depends to a great degree an art and an industry of the future. • • •

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Because of the demand for instruction in weaving Mr. and Mrs. Elphege Nadeau, originators of the new Hand-Skill loom with the metal frame, have started classes stressing the technical side of weaving at 59 Social Street, Woonsocket, Rhode Island. Classes will be given in the technique of hand-weaving, and in yarn and cloth analysis.

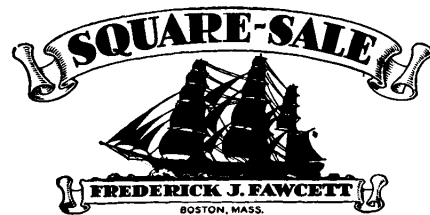


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