

A Modern Presentation of Hand-Weaving

By Katherine Woods

A NOTABLY beautiful exhibition of hand-weaving held in New York recently was especially interesting in showing the enduring place of hand-work in what is universally known as the "machine age." This was the exhibition arranged by the Snow Looms, of which Miss Edith Huntington Snow is Director, at the Art Center in the month of January. It was an exhibition which the visitor, struck upon entering by the array of lovely color and the variety of beautiful design, could not leave without a thoughtful sense of the *value* of this exquisite hand-work — hand-weaving for the most part, but also hand-dyeing, and even hand-spinning, along with which, too, was shown handmade pottery and furniture and hand-wrought silver tableware. The room was picturesquely and attractively set forth with lovely things, and the eye went first to one piece of hand-work and then to another, and soon through all the varied collection till one could not fail to realize the *unique* quality of such work.

It is customary to speak of the advantages of hand-weaving from the point of view of the weaver, to attest the satisfaction which lies in the creation of a beautiful fabric with one's own hands and according to one's own ideas and taste; and that is a valid argument, of course. It is especially forceful in a machine age, too, just because the invention of one labor-saving device after another has relieved the woman in the household of the drudgery of old household tasks and set her free,

as one weaver has said, to use her hands not to clean kerosene lamps, but to satisfy the timeless urge for the individual creation of beauty. But it is possible, by dwelling subjectively upon these satisfactions of hand-work, to slight, and thus to minimize, the importance of the handmade article itself; unwittingly, therefore, to give force to the assumption that in an era when machines have been so perfected as to produce a well-nigh perfect output, the value of hand-woven fabrics is



SPINNING FLAX FOR HAND-WEAVING

Courtesy The Snow Looms

Photograph by Ira Wright Martin

outmoded and only the value of the "joy of the working" remains. In laying the ghost of this mistaken assumption, the exhibition of the Snow Looms was of importance to everyone interested in any kind of handcraft. In spite of, and alongside, and in many instances together with, most noteworthy improvements in the product of the machine in this day when the machine seems to be both servant and master of our civilization, hand-work remains unique. . . . The most significant implication of the present broad and growing interest in hand-weaving is the fact that there is, and will continue to be, a distinct place for beautiful, fine, and individual hand-work with the public which prizes the qualities of beauty, fineness and individuality.

It was evident in the first place, at this exhibition in the Art Center, that these exquisite fabrics of silk, wool, linen, and cotton had a texture quite different from the texture of machine-woven things. This is not to pose the question of whether one is better than the other: it is simply to state the fact of an existing difference which gives the hand-woven fabric a distinct character of its own. Then, too, the materials for the hand-woven articles are usually hand-dyed, sometimes hand-spun, points which have a part in the achievement of texture.

Several beautiful examples of modern tapestry weaving had their part in this exhibition. And one has only to look at machine tapestry and then at the "real" kind to be assured of the inherent distinction of the hand-work. Just as there is never any question of recognizing the difference between a rug knotted and woven by hand and a machine-made product (though the machines be set down in the Orient itself!), so there is no question of the difference between hand-woven and machine-woven tapestry. It is interesting to note, in this connection, that Miss Snow has personally studied

the work of the great tapestry centers of France, visiting the Gobelins *ateliers*, the Government workshops at Beauvais, and the private hand-loom "manufactories" at Aubusson, and watching the processes of the looms in the work now being done at all these places and also in smaller modern studios in Paris.

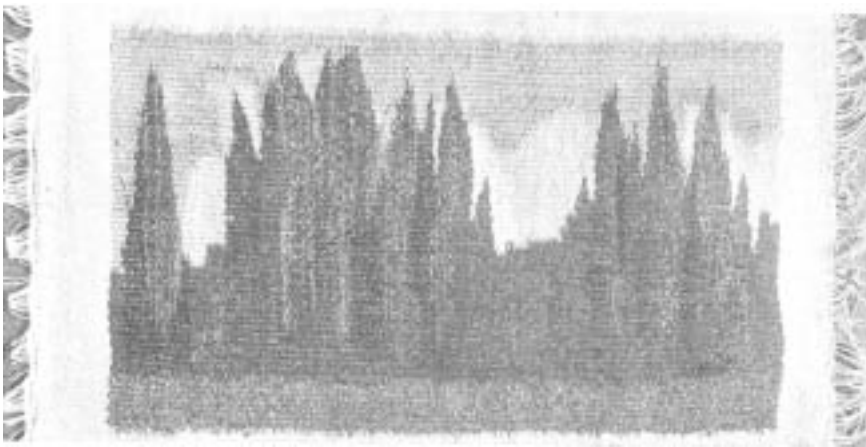
Another significant little point in the showing of the place of hand-weaving among us was evident in the presence of a number of charming, "smart," and much admired hand-bags, semi-circular purses made of wool and finished with solid frames. These are among the articles which can be made only by hand. They are woven on looms of cardboard, thread by thread. They cannot be made in any other way.

But perhaps the most generally appealing "count" in the case for the continued popularity of hand-woven fabrics lies in the simple, abiding, and all-inclusive fact of the *individuality* of hand-work. And in witness to this individuality the Art Center exhibition was rich. It is most unlikely that any visitor who saw this varied array of beautiful things will ever have to be reminded of the preponderant importance of "exactly the right thing for the right place," the thing that could not be turned out by the thousand in "quantity production," the thing that is irresistibly charming because it is *just so*, and, thus, just as it should be.

The *variety* evidenced in this achievement of individuality through hand-work was, naturally enough, one of the interesting features of the exhibition, and it showed itself in two ways—in the collection of finished articles and fabrics found in the exhibition room, and in the work which could be seen in process in the Snow Looms' own studio upstairs. All kinds and types of hand-woven things were on display, from the primitive and colonial work on through to modern treatments in line

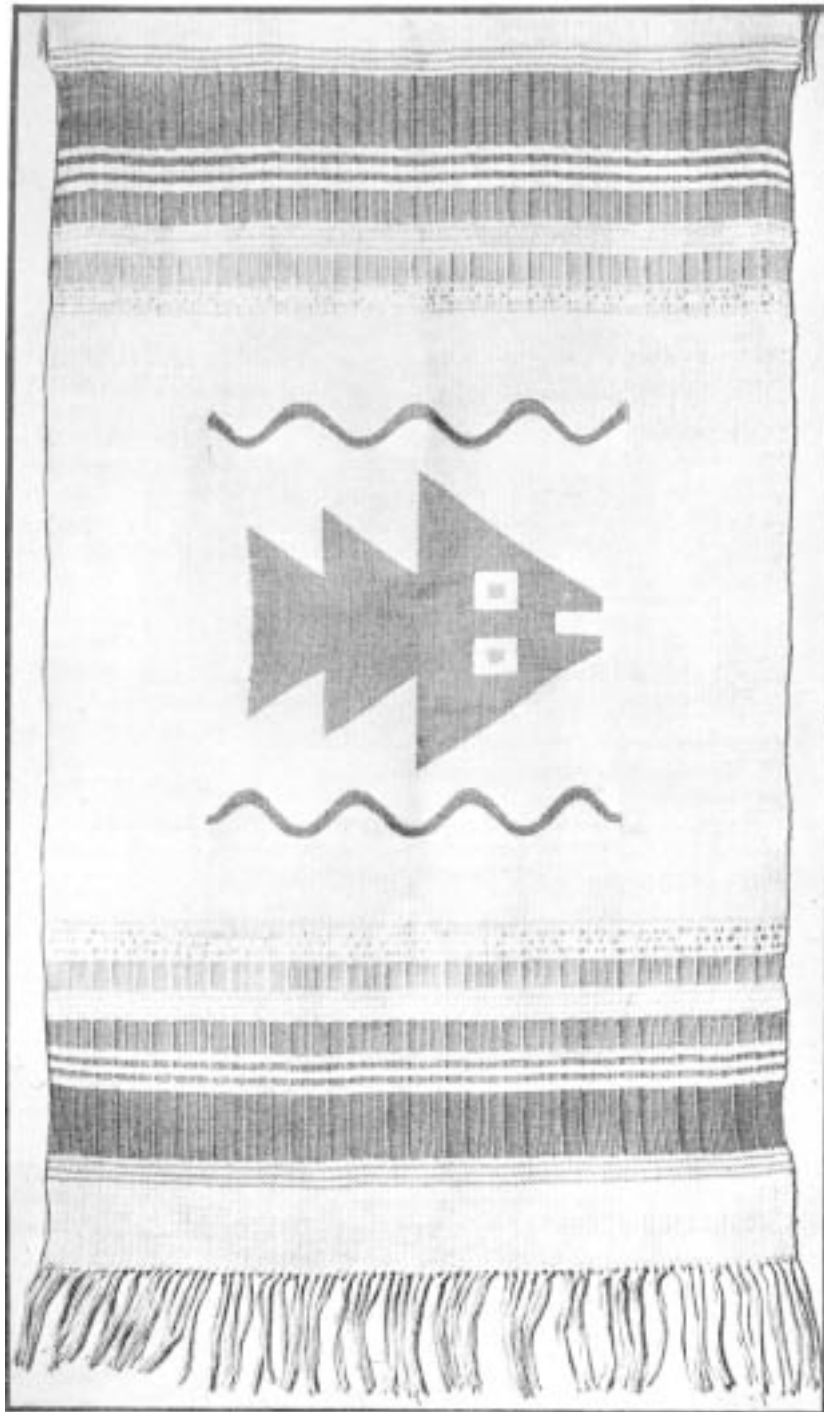
color, and arrangement. Fifteen other craftsmen added their handiwork to that of the Snow Looms for the exhibition, and the result was a vigorous showing of different ways in which hand-weaving is worked out by individual weavers.

In the Snow Looms' studio many visitors took advantage of the opportunity to see what really amounted to an annex to the main exhibition. For here on the looms the processes of work



TAPESTRY TREES

by Mrs. M. B. Streeter under the direction of The Snow Looms
Courtesy of Woman's Home Companion



PERUVIAN DESIGN. MODERN IN FEELING AND COLORING
Woven by Dorothy Cook Hambridge
Courtesy of Woman's Home Companion



TABLE SET WITH HAND WOVEN LINEN MADE BY THE SNOW LOOMS
AND ARRANGED WITH HAND-WROUGHT SILVER AND POTTERY
by Miss Margaret Thompson of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Courtesy of the Art Center Bulletin

could be examined most illuminatingly. On an eight-harness loom an interesting pattern, more complicated than that seen on the table downstairs, was being developed in linen in three tones. A pattern of "Summer and Winter" weave in silk had its place on a six-harness loom. Work was being done on four-harness and two-harness equipment and also on the simpler appliances that included a plain wooden frame on which a primitive form of tapestry was being woven, and cardboard looms for square and semi-circular bags.

While this broader variety of fabrics-in-the-making was to be seen in the studio, the exhibition itself included demonstrations of processes of unusual interest. On a modern four-harness loom a weaver was at work during each afternoon of the exhibition, in the production of a modern piece of hand-woven linen. In another corner of the exhibition room an expert in the almost forgotten craft of spinning (Miss Catharine Ames of Foxcroft, Virginia, who may bear the official title of "registered spinster" in recognition of her skill in this time-honored hand-work) was busy with her flax on a Colonial spinning-wheel, an antique flax-basket at her side. Although the actual work of hand-dyeing could not practicably be shown at such an exhibition, a display of hand-dyed materials—

silk, wool and cotton — added its own rich note of color to the colorful beauty of the room as a whole.

As a critic of the decorative arts has pointed out in an article on this exhibition and its significance (Walter Rendell Storey, in the *New York Times*, January 20, 1929), one realized upon looking at these many fabrics that weaving was "not a simple process but one that has many forms." Here, again, variety was an outstanding feature of the display. In a sense, the articles shown were grouped about the table laid with the Snow Looms' linen which had been set with hand-made pottery and hand-wrought silver by Miss Margaret Thompson of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. And the far reach, so to speak, of hand-

work in general and hand-weaving in particular, was suggested at once in the wall piece which formed the table's background. This was a wide woven coverlet, of hand-dyed spun silk in which pale yellow was the prevailing color, intended to serve as the cover for a day-bed, and of uncommon and beautiful texture and design; it was one of the "Pippa silks" woven under the direction of Mrs. John Beach in Asolo, Italy. A number of these soft and lovely silk fabrics were displayed at the Snow Looms' exhibition; they are designed by an American after old Venetian and Moorish motives, and include curtains, furniture coverings, and hangings in different sizes. The table, set with the hand-woven linen and showing the wall-piece behind it, appears in one of our illustrations.

Five wall panels designed and woven by Mrs. Dorothy Cook Hambridge were especially noticed for their originality as well as for the charm of their modern work. One of the illustrations shows one of the most arresting of these hangings, a fish motif which is of primitive Peruvian origin but is quite modern in its color treatment.

The silk tapestry piece illustrated, a group of trees against a sunset sky, was designed by Miss Snow and woven by Mrs. M. B. Streeter on a 20-inch four-harness table loom. In this piece of weav-

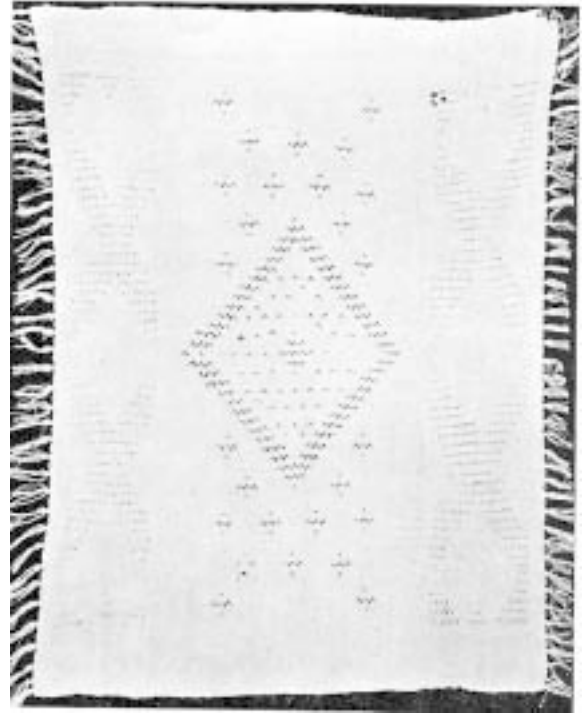
ing the weft threads were carried over and under two warp threads after the manner of Coptic weaving. Another charming silk tapestry piece was the design, in soft colors, of birds over water, the work of Miss Mabel Garrett.

The loom flung its threads far over time and space, again, in the piece of weaving done by Mrs. Gertrude Howells, which, as shown in the exhibition, is pictured in another one of our illustrations. This was a piece of heavy white linen woven according to a method used in Spain, Greece, and the islands of the Mediterranean 250 years ago, and still practised in the Greek islands; it is quite unlike any weaving generally known here, and has the appearance of being perforated. The work was Mrs. Howells' own adaptation.

A very different type of weaving, also shown in one of the photographs, was to be seen in the antique colonial bed-spread which formed a picturesque and fitting background for the spinning-wheel. This was a good example of "double weaving," with the pattern developed in black wool, relieved by occasional blue stripes, on a white ground. It was an unusually well-preserved piece, from the North Carolina mountains, and is a noteworthy illustration of the older types shown.

In marked contrast to this example of Colonial handicraft was a thoroughly modern design for a tapestry rug, the work of Miss Helen Phelps and Miss Mina Meyers. The rug was planned to be woven in sections, one of which was exhibited, while a cartoon of the entire floor-covering showed the arrangement of the sections making up the whole. The colors were soft—greys, tans and mauves—with interesting lines of white and black, and the effect of the whole was striking and exceedingly attractive. A quite different kind of rug and a new note in the American rug crafts was introduced in the collection of tufted rugs from the Tenafly Weavers, knotted and woven after the manner of Norwegian floor-coverings, but in a new adaptation of which this was the first showing.

Another interesting piece of work shown by a group of weavers was the long table-cloth of heavy linen, with a colored border in flat tapestry, contributed to the exhibition by the Elizabeth Fiske Guild. This organization carries on the traditional type of weaving begun and perfected by Mrs. Fiske many years ago in a little town in Vermont.



A LINEN IN OLD SPANISH EMBROIDERY WEAVE
by Mrs. Gertrude Howells
Photograph by Ira Wright Martin

The temptation, naturally, is to go on and on with an enumeration of the charming, individual, and representative pieces of hand-weaving displayed. One must, of course, content oneself with just those few examples which serve to make clear something of the exhibition's variety, and thus to show the wide range of creative accomplishment and the individuality of the product offered by hand-weaving today. It is interesting to note, too, that on the walls of the Snow Looms' studio upstairs were hung panels of Norwegian weaving and of French tapestry, lent for the occasion of the exhibition by craftsmen who had imported them. One ran the scale of hand-weaving at this exhibition, in time through centuries of weaving history, in distance across three continents, in what tradition and modernity alike have to give us in variety of color and design. And one knew the place of hand-weaving to be secure.