

The A B C of the Coverlet

By Roger Millen



OUR American coverlets may, for purposes of identification, be separated into five classes: the "Four-harness Overshot," the "Double-woven," the "Reverse Twill," the "Summer and Winter," and the "Jacquard." The patterns are, to some extent, common to at least four of these, but the weaving technic is so distinctive in each case that no confusion need exist. The classification is my own and is based on examples which I have found to be most typical in New Jersey and Eastern Pennsylvania. No claim is made that it is all-inclusive. The territory covered in research is limited, and it is quite possible that coverlets developed in weaves wholly unknown therein are well known elsewhere. If such there be, go, mark them well—and tell us about it.

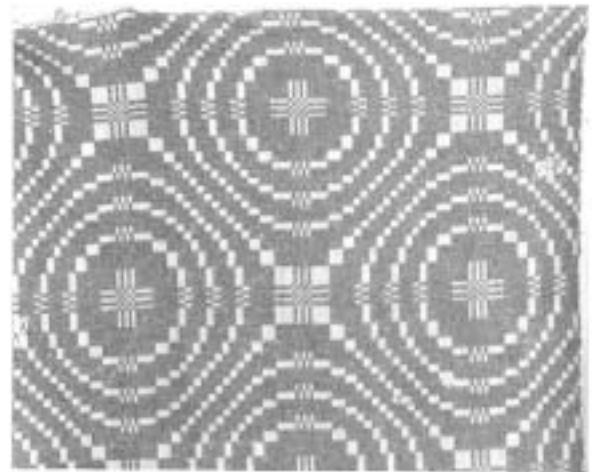
Everyone, it would seem, in this "antique conscious" day, knows his Phyfes, Stiegles, and Reveres, but the coverlets remain, for very many of us—just coverlets. That they differ from each other in inspiration, period, and technic quite as sharply as a Tudor chair differs from one typical of the Fifteenth Louis, is a fact not generally observed.

We have always had cabinet-makers, potters, silversmiths and other craftsmen who were able to carry on the traditions of the great creative masters. The coming of the machine age played havoc in their ranks, to be sure, but the weavers—where were they? With the introduction of the steam-driven loom, the craft of hand loom weaving was swiftly reduced to little more than a tradition in the United States. The housewife found herself relieved of a task which must often have been arduous and exacting, and able to replace her slowly wrought fabrics with the novel factory-made goods. For the professional weavers, whose livelihood depended upon a knowledge and dexterity gained through a long apprenticeship, the change was disastrous, indeed. Forced into other occupations, their skill died with them, and the working knowledge of the craft as practiced in their day was virtually lost.

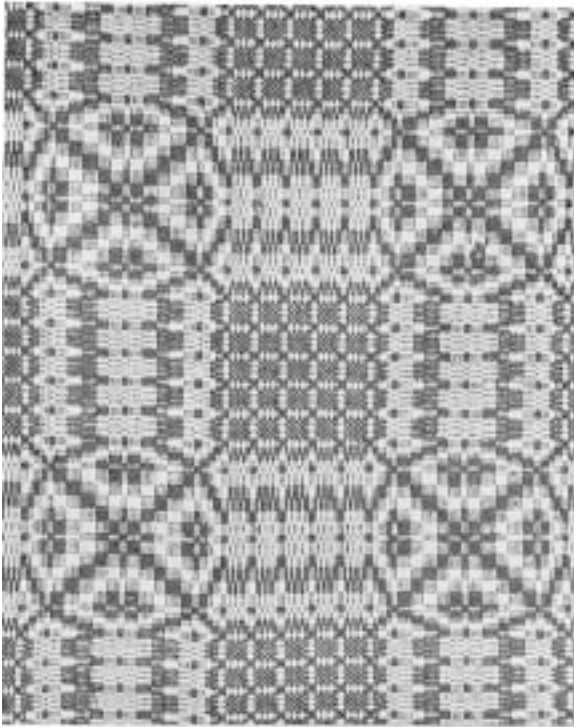
While a knowledge of the history of the craft is very essential to the modern weaver, it must re-

main a dead language to most of us. Today, if one aspired to the competence in the preparation of cotton, linen, and wool, which was common knowledge a century ago, a very considerable amount of research and years spent in experimenting would be necessary. In this time-driven age we shall do well indeed, if we strive at our looms to achieve a craftsmanship worthy of our heritage. And what resources at our command! Yarns in cotton, linen, silk, and wool, of the highest grade and in a range of colors undreamed of in Colonial days. Looms ranging in size from tiny table models to the most complicated types equipped with many harnesses and embodying the best working principles. Three or four of these of varying capacity may easily be housed in the space required by one of the ponderous Colonial looms with its accessories.

Of the old weaving, little remains save the coverlets, but what a rich store of these! Always an object of pride to the weaver or original owner, most of them that survived the reign of terror in home decoration and furnishing, did so because of sentiment. "We've never used it but kept it laid away because Grandma was always so choice of it. No, I guess we wouldn't care to sell it," and then, with a genuine, but quite mistaken, tribute to



SUMMER AND WINTER WEAVE
Courtesy The Newark Museum, Newark, N. J.



1. FOUR-HARNES OVERTSHOT

Grandma's foresight, "But they do say they fetch a good price nowadays."

Anyone who has followed the lure of the coverlet must have heard this almost word for word, again and again. So here we are with the loom of our choice, an almost bewildering variety of materials, and the weaving traditions of the entire world at our command. Quite naturally and properly, the resources of our own land will be the first to claim our attention, and here it is that colonial weaving ceases to be a dead language, and the old coverlets become an inexhaustible mine of example and suggestion.

We must cultivate a really knowing eye; we must learn to read a piece of weaving as a musician reads his music; and we must, above all, be able to visualize, and transpose, and adapt, so that a scrap of an old coverlet rescued from a corner of a woodshed may, perhaps, resolve into a sumptuous winter coat, a handsome rug, a pair of portieres, or a hand bag! This, as perhaps most of us know, is not at all difficult, yet there are weavers who are accepting all of their patterns "second hand," and missing altogether this thrill of discovery, the delight at finding and applying something which comes to one like a fraternal gesture from the original weaver. "There ye have it! 'Twas my own notion!"

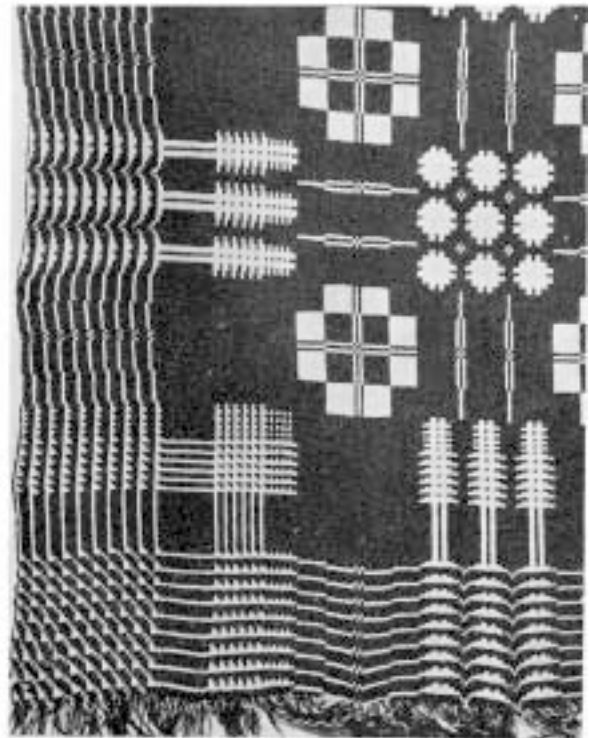
Before weaving analysis and draught writing are attempted, one should be prepared to distinguish almost at a glance the nature of any cov-

erlet examined. Otherwise we may find in the course of our earlier adventures that we have "bitten off more than we can chew"—an unnecessarily discouraging experience. Let us look, then, in order at the "Four-harness Overshot," the "Double-woven," the "Reverse Twill," the "Summer and Winter," and the "Jacquard."

The "Four-harness Overshot," shown in Figure 1, vastly out-numbers all of the other weaves. This is readily explained by the fact that, as the name implies, a loom of only four harnesses is required to produce any one of the several hundred known patterns. These looms, which were also used for weaving every other fabric required in the early American household, were as typical as the great fireplaces, and quite as indispensable as they together provided the three prime necessities—heat, food, and clothing.

The weaving of the overshot patterns is extremely simple, and the old threading draughts were handed down from mother to daughter and copied and circulated among the neighbors. No doubt, too, the number and variety of blue and white "kivers" which a housewife could display was a matter of pardonable pride to her, and the source of considerable prestige in her own neck of the woods. As coverlets of this type were typically "home made," they were the first to be produced in the colonies, and the last to succumb to the invasion of the power looms.

The indigo plant from which the deathless and

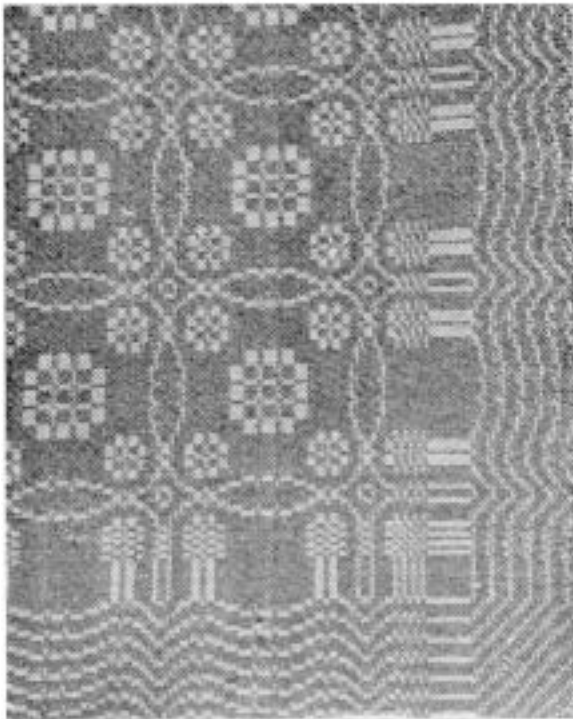


2. DOUBLE-WOVEN

unmistakable "coverlet blue" dye was made, was plentiful everywhere, and its use so simplified by means of the perennial dye pot, that the majority of the coverlets were made in this color. Red, green, brown, and some yellow were also used, and combinations of two or more shades are frequently found, some very lovely, and some very deplorable! White cotton or linen was used for the warp and "tabby" or "binder."

These features of material and color apply somewhat to all classes of coverlets, but the unique feature which sets apart the group here considered appears in the name, "overshot." The pattern threads, wherever they appear, are raised over the white foundation in "skips" or "floats." The wool pattern is "overshot" above the cotton or linen base. This is most noticeable in the largest of the "blocks" which compose the design, as the pattern threads skip over eight, ten, or even twelve, of the warp threads. The whole design is slightly raised above the white base, and this feature, while very striking and attractive, also spelled the doom of the coverlets that met with continuous use. These overshot pattern threads had to take the brunt of the wear and tear, and how the moths loved them! I know a very old and finely woven example so worn that the pattern is indistinguishable.

Overshot patterns were sometimes developed with more than four harnesses, but these are very rare and not particularly desirable; just the old



3 REVERSE TWILL



4 JACQUARD
Collection of Dr. G. Wyckoff Cummins

weave trying to be high hat.

"Double-woven" is a name no less descriptive than "Four-harness Overshot." The coverlets in this class are precisely that. Two warp beams were used, one for the white cotton base or background and one for the wool pattern, and two interlacing fabrics were woven. Coverlets of this type may be identified very readily. The pattern and background appear in fields of pure color without any of the half-tone effect characteristic of the overshot weave. A typical example is shown in Figure 2. They are usually much heavier than the other types, and if one selects a large pattern block, it will be found that the fabric composing it may be separated from the white block on the reverse side. Red was frequently combined with the blue and white with fine effect.

With the "Double-woven" coverlet, and the more complicated looms involved, we leave the scene of the pioneer cabin and enter the realm of the more pretentious colonial home, or the field of the journey-man weaver who sometimes travelled about with his loom mounted upon an ox-drawn cart, weaving from yarns prepared in anticipation of his coming. There is about these double-woven coverlets an air of dignity and solid well-being which bespeaks a day of comparative security and prosperity—less of hardship and more of ease. They enjoyed their greatest popularity during the last half of the eighteenth century.

The "Reverse Twill" coverlet was contemporary with the double-woven, and the patterns employed are very closely related, but there the resemblance ceases. Wool was used, as a rule, for both warp and weft. The single exception known to the writer is developed in linen and wool and appears to be very old. A detail of this coverlet is used for Figure 3, and serves the purpose in illustrating the weave much better than the color combinations more commonly found.

Beautiful shades of madder red seem to have been favored for the warp; a deep blue for the weft. The distinguishing feature of the weave is the "twill," which runs in one diagonal through the pattern and the opposite way through the background. As no tabby thread is used, the fabric is delightfully soft and yielding. A fine specimen recently examined showed a variation of rather light blue stripes running through the rose warp. The effect, with the dark blue weft, was very unusual and handsome.

The "Summer and Winter" coverlet appears almost as a "sport" among the better known varieties, but it is difficult to understand why this should be. The technic is simplicity itself and requires a loom only slightly more elaborate than the overshot weaving. The fabric is distinctive, very durable, economical in the material required, and strikingly handsome. Examples of it are very rarely found in the territory known to the writer. The Museum of the City of Newark, New Jersey, has a fine coverlet in this weave, a detail of which is illustrated. A careful study of this cut will prove a better aid to identification than any suggestions that I may offer. The fabric is smooth and closely woven, somewhat lighter in weight than the other types described. The pattern thread is "tied in" by every fourth warp thread, the whole surface presents a subtle blend of color. A little white appears in the blue pattern, a little blue in the white ground. As in the other weaves discussed, a white linen or cotton warp was used with a blue wool pattern yarn.

The "Jacquard" coverlets have their name from the loom upon which they were woven. This loom differed radically from every type previously used. It was exceedingly complicated, but permitted a freedom in design which was altogether new, and human nature being what it is, the results, in many instances, betray an amusing lack of restraint. Spread eagles were a favorite motif, with "E Pluribus Unum" inscribed on the streamers which they flaunted, as eagles will. Fruits and flowers in elaborate profusion were characteristic, as well as public buildings and public men.

The colors were often atrocious. Riotous shades of red, green and blue were thrown together with no apparent thought of keeping the peace. Very

often the weaver's name, town and the date of weaving appeared on a corner, with the customer's name opposite. This was a nice touch as it adds greatly to the value of such coverlets today. Occasionally, however, an intelligent effort was made toward restraint in design and color, and some of these coverlets are really magnificent. As the first Jacquard loom was brought to America in 1825, most of the coverlets in this class were produced during the thirties and forties.

In addition to the foregoing classes, many isolated examples may be found which refuse to be classified. Odd star-shaped patterns made with a perfect swarm of harnesses; more curious ribbed patterns with a Scandinavian air; others in red and blue squares which surely do not justify the labor expended upon them; all these and many more have come to light, but very few have proved either attractive in themselves or adaptable to modern uses.

How regrettable that anything need be said about cheap, machine-made imitations of the hand-woven coverlet! The weaving of honest reproductions, to be treasured or marketed for what they are, merits every encouragement; but to offer machine-made coverlets as reproductions is a palpable fraud, and this is being done in at least one widely advertised instance. The old patterns are copied with diabolical accuracy, and the coverlets turned out on power looms at prices with which the hand-loom weaver cannot hope to compete. A cleverly composed catalog is sent to the inquiring, and while the statement is nowhere made that the material is hand-woven, this impression is adroitly built up. We are assured, however, that the coverlets are made without a seam, and here we have a sure means of detection! The Jacquard coverlets are the only type which were sometimes made without a seam through the center. This was due, of course, to the limitation of a weaver's "reach" in passing the shuttle to and fro. The coverlets were therefore made in two strips and sewn together. Since the machine-made article may be produced more cheaply in one piece, this "improvement" is offered as a mark of superiority!

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