

Modern Treatments of Tapestry and Embroidery Weaves

BY EDITH HUNTINGTON SNOW

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IN THE June number of the *HANDICRAFTER* embroidery weaves of various kinds were discussed. In the present article I take up briefly the "laid in" embroidery weave and some of the more modern aspects of tapestry weaving. Near me, in this marvellous land of France, just over a range of hills and beyond a few river valleys, is Aubusson, which we visited last year, with its private factories for both machine- and hand-made tapestries and rugs in the "traditional" manner; and we have come again this year through Angers, where that glowing marvel of the 14th century, a whole series of tapestries, with scenes from the Apocalypse, is hanging in the Cathedral for which it was originally made. But in this article I am not dealing with such magnificent great tapestries as these of the Gothic and Renaissance periods, that still adorn the cathedrals and the very châteaux of the 15th and 16th centuries for which they were woven; but, instead, it is of smaller and simpler and more intimate examples of embroidery weaving and modern tapestry that I write — of work done on looms small enough for our own use in this crowded 20th century, where space has to be considered in the choosing and setting up of a loom, and where few of us have unlimited time for handwork though we have the taste to appreciate its merits and the urge to fashion some particular bit of hand-woven fabric for ourselves or our homes.

The illustrations I am using are from examples worked out in our studio in New York, and either woven there or in the homes of pupils, none of them woven on looms over a yard in width, and several woven on tiny looms only eight inches

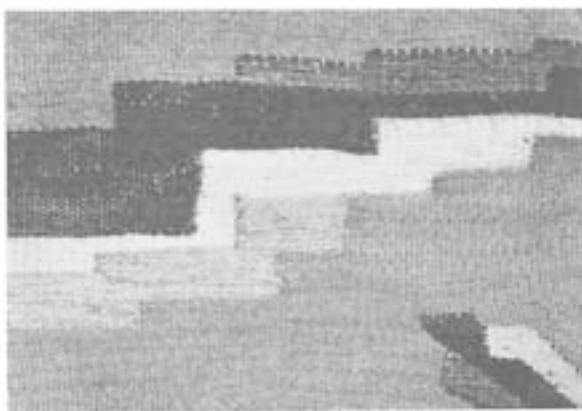
across. It is not with tapestry as an exhibit that we are concerned in this article, but with modern tapestry in the laboratory. . . .

The up-to-date weaver has familiarized himself with the diversified methods used in other days and other lands, and adapts his weaving to the problem of decoration he has in mind for his immediate work, choosing the method best calculated to give him the effect of decoration and texture he wishes to produce.

Our first illustration (No. 1) shows a *sampler*, which was made by a "beginning pupil" and was her first experience with tapestry and the "laid in" embroidery weave. Its faults are obvious, and it shows not only what to do, but what *to try not to do*, as well.

In spite of faults it was sufficiently colorful and attractive in texture to warrant making up into a purse, the part shown in the picture, only, making the front flap. With this problem an écru linen warp 40/2 was used, with fifteen threads to the inch. The weft threads were of hand-dyed spun silk, some threads finer than others, which accounts for the ease with which the warp was — or was not — entirely covered. The background weft was of dull tan, wound two threads together, of a fine soft spun silk floss. The tension of the linen warp was kept tight, and the fine weft threads covered or "packed" down over the warp threads easily. A small iron comb was used instead of the beater, as more effective than the beater for pushing the weft threads into place. . . .

The word *tapestry* has come to indicate a method as well as a product. We think of tapestry as a method by which the warp threads are entirely covered with the weft, and by which each color of



Photograph by Ira Wright Martin

I — *Sampler. Lesson in beginning tapestry and embroidery weaving. Woven under the direction of the Snow Looms*

weft denotes a different end (or bobbin, or small shuttle of wound thread) continuing back and forth across the warp threads, only as far as each color is needed in the design. The top side of the warp, or the side toward the weaver, is the wrong side when finished: it is easier in this way to dispose of the ends of weft left as the work progresses.

In our sampler (illustration No. I) the colors were soft tan of several tones made irregular by re-dipping (when hand-dyeing) for the background, then orchid, American beauty red, soft yellow, a medium green, used in the design in this order from bottom to top, where the green, red, and orchid were repeated in a small triangle of color. A very simple design, this, chosen so that it should not offer too many problems for a beginner.

The main points to be kept in mind were, first, keeping an even tension of warp threads; second, watching the *sheds*, so that in changing from one color to another all the warp threads should be "covered"; and, third, to see whether or not, on the vertical lines between the colors, the threads should be interlocked. The tension (point 1), you will notice, was good at the start, but later was not kept taut, which accounts for the curving lines in the weaving toward the top. Point 3: between the first color of the design, orchid, and the background, the threads have not been interlocked and an open

slit has been left. With the majority of the old French and Flemish tapestries, vertical lines between colors were not interlocked, but were left as slits, and, unless the design made use of these slits to enhance the value of the outline, as was often the case, these slits, especially when long, were sewed up on the wrong side after the tapestry was taken off the loom. Between the dark red and the background of our sampler, on the vertical line at the right, the weft threads were interlocked around a single warp thread, and on the vertical lines between the yellow (the lightest color) and the colors next it, the weft threads *themselves* were interlocked, as were also the vertical lines in the small design near the top.

Here, too, at the left top, we took up another problem. Up to that time we had been weaving from side to side, back and forth in regular order, changing the colors as the design demanded. But on the top left the background was carried up to a point, before the red and green of the design were introduced. This demonstrates one of the most interesting characteristics of tapestry weaving. Tapestry is not usually woven on straight lines, but as the design demands one can build up the work in pyramids — that is, work up to a *point* — leaving another part of the design to be filled in later, always remembering that *it is not possible to fill in any form under another form*. So, with attention in watching sheds, and the design, the weaver can feel freed from the necessity of straight-line working. A design made up entirely of angles weaves very quickly, for no interlocking is needed on a diagonal line.

In our sampler, at the beginning, the background thread was woven continuously for an inch or so. Having finished this inch, the design was begun; that is, an orchid thread was introduced. Our background thread, which at this point came over from right to left on shed A, stopped short about an inch before reaching the left side, and an orchid thread was inserted, here, in shed A, also from right to left. The new orchid thread began where the tan left



Photograph by Ira Wright Martin

II—Tapestry woven on linen warp from an old Russian design. Adapted by the Snow Looms. Woven by Dorothy Cooke Hambridge

off, and its short end was caught around the right-hand *lower* warp thread, in this section of the design to be woven entirely by the orchid thread. Then the shed was changed to the B shed, and the orchid thread was brought back from left to right for the limit of its space in the design, and the tan thread was carried back on the B shed to the right edge. This was repeated from right to left and left to right until, on the vertical line between the two colors — since they had been woven quite independently of each other — the open slit appeared which we have mentioned above.

Where a weaver has interlocked his threads at all vertical lines in the design, the interlocking has usually not been done on both sheds. Interlocking is customarily done on every other shed, that is, not on both the A and B sheds, but on the B shed preferably, or when coming from left to right. Or perhaps, as often happens, the design will demand a long vertical line: here the interlocking may be done at regular intervals only, if desired — every fourth or sixth thread, for instance — according to the fineness of the weft threads.

You will notice a change in the texture of our sampler when the yellow (or lightest color in the design) was introduced. Two warp threads were pulled down together, instead of one, alternating with two threads on the opposite shed. This was the method used in much of the old Coptic tapestry. In our illustration No. II, of a swan sailing before a turreted castle, on a waving sea, the fine silk threads of the weft cover each pair of linen warp threads, the warp being threaded with thirty threads to the inch. This gives a different rib to the finished weaving. The diagonal lines in the curve of the swan's neck were more easily accomplished because just one thread could be dropped, or added, at a time, to keep the curved line from becoming too angular, or uneven, as it would have been if only fifteen threads to the inch had been used and the weft threads had passed over and under each single thread.

Now, to go back to our sampler: you will notice a still different texture in the green, or upper, color in the design, for here we have woven the green thread of the design, not as a tapestry weave, but as the embroidery weave known as the "laid in" pattern. Now here was no problem of interlocking threads, as the background weft thread of tan was carried back and forth across under the green thread of the design, at first from the edge where the green touched the yellow part of the design, at the right center, to the left edge, and, finally, after the yellow thread was discontinued on the completion of its part of the design, the tan background thread was carried from side to side of the sampler. The green spun silk weft thread was inserted *over* the tan background thread, and carried



Photograph by Ira Wright Martin

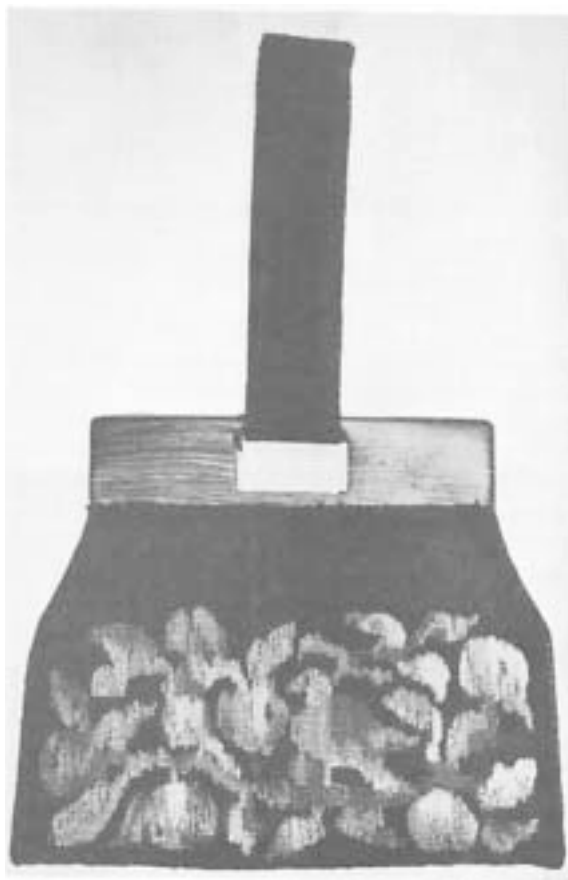
III — "Laid in" embroidery wall hanging. Woven by the Snow Looms

back and forth to the limits of its part in the design, always in the same shed as the tan weft thread — that is, on the A shed from the right and the B shed from the left. It is because of the possible similarity in appearance of much modern tapestry and the "laid in" embroidery weaving, that I have chosen to write in the same article of these two ways of weaving in a design.

Illustration No. III shows a design made for a wall hanging, which is woven with the "laid in" embroidery method. All the pattern threads *lie over* a continuous background thread. No interlocking of end threads is necessary when two colors in the embroidery weft threads come together, as there can be no slit between colors when the background weft thread is woven continuously underneath. All the embroidery colors could be cut away and leave a *web* of plain weaving. The ends at the beginning and ending of each colored thread of the embroidery weaving are finished in the usual way — either turned around the end warp thread and laid into the open shed for the distance of several warp threads, and cut off after the shed is changed; or else left long enough to be threaded into an embroidery needle, later, and darned in, when the weaving is taken off the loom.

This "laid in" embroidery weaving is quicker than tapestry weaving, obviously, and allows of much flexibility, both of design and of materials used. It is in this way that irregular bits of color can be effectively inserted, where the fabric desired depends for its beauty more upon its texture and beautiful coloring than upon its design. Our illustration of the "laid in" pattern was woven entirely of hand-dyed spun silk, in several shades and colors, blues, greens, and violets predominating. It will be easily seen that many things may be taken into account to change the effect of, and give wide

variations in, the final result of embroidery weaving such as this "laid in" method." The weights of warp and weft, for instance, are important. A fine warp and a heavier pattern thread will give a result quite different from the reverse. The firmness or looseness of beating may greatly vary the effect again; and a crêpe-y weft will blur and tone down



Photograph by Ira Wright Martin

IV — *Silk and wool tapestry bag. Designed by Edith Huntington Snow. Woven by Mrs. M. B. Streeter*

the colors of the warp more effectively than a smooth or twisted thread. Also, either the top side or the lower side may be used as the right side of the finished material, according to the effect desired, as the design on the top side, on which the threads are kept uppermost, has a little heavier outline and greater irregularity on its edges where the threads are carried back and forth around the warp threads as the work proceeds.

We will go back again, now, to illustration No. I, of our sampler, for we left it at the point where our pupil had finished putting in the green threads, which were "laid in." This represented the final color in the broader part of the motive which served as a design. Up to that time our pupil had been weaving across from side to side, and the green

embroidery weft thread had been finished off at the right side on the B shed. Now the tan background threads were brought from right to left on shed A to the point where the red thread was introduced, also on shed A, and at the left side of the tan design a new tan background thread was started also, which, as we said before, was carried up to its completion in a point before any other weaving was done, dropping a warp thread every other row to make the exact slant required. Next, the red pattern thread was woven back and forth on the same slant for six rows until it was time to introduce a green thread, care being used to see that the new green thread was introduced into the same shed that brought over a parallel line of red thread. Here as long as the vertical line continued between green and red the design was built up with the two threads interlocking on the vertical line between them, the red thread dropping a warp thread on its right side every other row and the green thread adding a warp thread on every other row. When the vertical line was finished the two colors, red and green, were continued on the same slant to the top of the design on the left edge.

Next the tan background threads were filled in from right to left up to the point where the last color in the triangle began, which was orchid. The orchid thread was inserted here on a point. When this is done the end of the weft thread is tied around one warp thread, and when the shed is changed two warp threads will be involved. The orchid spot increased over one extra warp thread on the left with every other row, and was interlocked with the tan as far as the line between tan and orchid continued vertical. Then the last diagonal part of the orchid design was woven, and not until this was finished was the final tan of the background filled in. After such a simple piece of weaving one is ready to attempt a more complicated design.

Both the swan and the material for the bag (illustration No. IV), as well as the sampler, were woven on a small four-harness "Structo" loom weaving only eight inches across. Contrary to usual thought, any loom on which an even and taut tension can be maintained, making two — or more — sheds, is suitable for modern tapestry. The great "traditional" tapestries of France and Flanders required a heavy frame on which strong twisted warp could be stretched and held at high tension, for in this was it possible to pack down the weft to cover the warp threads absolutely. The frames of the horizontal looms used at Beauvais are of iron, and at Aubusson one sees huge wooden beams on which the warp is stretched horizontally. Often in modern tapestry we use a fine twisted silk thread for the warp, as in illustration No. V, in which the orange color of the warp is allowed to show slightly, and to play an important part in the effect both of color

and texture in that piece, which was designed as a wall hanging.

Even with the material chosen for the bag (illustration No. IV), the warp, which was of a deep jade green, gave a glint of color through the duller bluegreen of the hand-dyed lustrone used as the background. This bag material was woven with the design developed from its side, and with the end of the design on one side of the material, nearest the weaver. That is, the design was woven across its narrow side rather than from the bottom up. Thus it was possible to weave this particular shape of bag on the little eight-inch loom with larger dimensions than if the design had been woven across from side to side. In this connection it may be noted that it was customary in "traditional" tapestry to weave all designs across from side to side of the cartoon. The ribs of the warp, in traditional tapestry, which was always firmly beaten, caught the light better when the design was woven in this way, and an intricate pattern could be seen to better advantage. You will notice that the ribs of our little bag-piece run horizontally. The design for this piece, which had been drawn first, the exact size wanted, and colored, was pinned under the warp threads to the first inch or two of plain weaving, and the design could be plainly seen through the threads. The warp had thirty threads of fine twisted silk to the inch, and, since the loom had four harnesses, it was easy enough to pull down two threads at a time across the warp instead of alternating by single threads. Here, as in the design of the swan, the weft threads were of soft hand-dyed silk. In weaving the bag the threads were interlocked on all vertical edges. But in the case of the swan the design was built up entirely from plane to plane, working without interlocking from a broader base to a point, even though the changes of color were so frequent that only a few threads of a single color could be put in at a time.

With the illustration No. V, an abstract design for a modern tapestry wall hanging, there was much more freedom, both in method and in material used. Into a brilliant orange warp, which only shows clearly in the fringe but gives a cast to the whole piece, several different weights and kinds of material have been woven. There are no ribs to be seen here. The beating has been lighter and the curves have been made by building up from a base to a narrower level and then carrying a line in some darker or lighter color around the entire bit thus woven, so that curved lines flow with the rhythm of the design. A large part of the background weft thread in this piece was dyed with broken spots of color, which explains the unevenness of effect. The colors in the pattern were greens, blues, and yellows, and black. Where little perpendicular lines appear in two light spaces in the design,

a stiffer yarn has been used, which has the effect of drawing the soft warp threads together in irregular groups. The lightest and most solid-looking spots, like the circle in the center, for instance, were woven with pale yellow chenille, which covers a finer warp thread completely. Care was used in this free handling of tapestry to manage the different sheds so that no warp threads were left exposed for any appreciable distance, as nothing makes a piece of tapestry so slipshod as the careless exposure of long warp threads here and there. On the other hand, we often weave tapestry nowadays, showing quite frankly the warp threads, either as a planned effect of texture or to make use of a specific color in the warp. Even in modern wool tapestries for upholstery or wall hangings, one often finds a colored warp showing through the threads of the weft. And what one considers modern today, either in method or effect, can almost always be paralleled in the past in some phase or other of achievement, if one looks long enough into what has always been done by so many people and in so many manners.



Photograph by Ira Wright Martin

V — Wall hanging of fine silk tapestry, modern design. Designed and woven by the Snow Looms

The simple design used in our sampler was drawn on a piece of squared paper and colored. Each two threads of warp represented one square, and there were from two to six weft threads in each square, according to the fineness or thickness of the colored threads.

(Continued on page 36)

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(Continued from page 33)

With the wall hanging (illustration No. V) the design was sketched briefly on a small piece of paper and pinned to the loom for reference in getting the correct proportions. With the swan and the bag project, both designs were made to scale and used constantly as a guide, pinned below the warp threads.

I might add that we use for tapestry the *upright*, and also the ordinary horizontal looms, and the primitive tapestry looms as well. The upright loom has some points of advantage, but so has the horizontal loom, and both kinds are easier to work on than the simpler tapestry frame. The usual modern weaver finds it easy to adapt himself to the use of either a two- or four-harness horizontal loom, especially if the loom is firmly built and has a fair-sized lap, so that the design can be visualized as the work proceeds. On any such loom both the embroidery and the tapestry weaving we have been considering can move swiftly enough for entire enjoyment.



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IT IS difficult, of course, to disentangle the strictly racial characteristics in art entirely from those other strong influences which, in fact, may be said to have helped in their formation — the influence of climate, habit, and local materials. Yet the purely human element appears to come in, and the final form which the art takes among a people must bear the stamp of individual choice as well as collective sentiment and climatic influence.

In primitive communities, however, the individual is less apparent than the collective racial influence. The forms of art are typical and symbolical rather than imitative and graphic. The great Asiatic races of antiquity, to judge from the remains of their monuments, the palaces of their kings, and their temples and tombs, adopted certain typical methods of representation which in the case of the ancient Egyptians became, in association with a strictly ordered and carefully organized social existence under an elaborate religious system and ritual, actual forms of language and record in the hieroglyphic. These consisted of certain abstract representations of familiar forms and figures inclosed in a kind of cartouche, incised upon stone walls or stamped upon plaster and filled with color.