

TAPESTRY-WEAVING
AT THE DOVECOT STUDIOS

BY

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A visitor to the Corstorphine section of the Scottish capital will notice in the grounds of the former historic Forrester Castle a one-story gray stone building. This is the home of the Tapestry-Weaving Center in Scotland which takes its name from the unused sixteenth century dovecot in the surrounding garden. At the beginning of this century, Corstorphine was a village separated by farms from Edinburgh. In 1912 the Marquis of Bute, impressed by the quality of the tapestries produced in the workshop of William Morris at Merton Abbey, was inspired to establish this highly specialized craft in Scotland. The result was the Dovecot Studios.

It is sad to record that the two original weavers, imported from Merton Abbey, were killed in the First World War. They had, however, trained three Scottish weavers, one of whom retired as recently as 1963. The high standard of craftsmanship which was set in the early days is being continued by the present staff of weavers.

The workshop at Corstorphine is a large rectangular ground-floor room with windows on one long side. In it stand six mid-seventeenth century looms, measuring from four to twenty feet, brought from a former tapestry-weaving workshop in Soho (Fig. 1). Of the two loom positions traditional for tapestry-weaving – vertical (*haute lisse* – high warp) or horizontal (*basse lisse* – low warp), Dovecot tapestries are woven on high warp looms like these.

A tapestry may be created in one of two ways. For very simple patterns, a weaver can be both craftsman and designer. From only the germ of an idea, he can develop the decoration of a tapestry in the process of weaving. Many skilled workers in Scandinavia and Eastern European countries still adhere to this system. But from at least the late fourteenth century in Europe it has been customary to weave elaborate scenes from cartoons prepared by artists. The craftsmen, however, preserved a great deal of freedom in their choice of



Fig. 1. A mid-seventeenth century loom at the Dovecot Studios.

colors and in the minor details of the design until late in the eighteenth century.

The creative craftsmen at the Dovecot Studios prefer to follow the older tradition of working from an idea. When a tapestry is commissioned, however, the weavers are sometimes presented with a specific design to be reproduced. The accompanying photographs illustrate their procedure as work progresses on a tapestry entitled *Flight into Egypt*, now in the Royal Scottish Museum in Edinburgh.

A tracing of the artist's sketch is made on clear plastic, as seen in Figure 2. The tracing is subsequently photographed and then enlarged to the desired size of the tapestry. When this enlargement is placed behind the warp, the dark lines can be discerned between the threads. The weaver then, in a process called "inking on," reproduces this drawing by marking each warp thread all the way around with a flat pen (Fig. 3).

With these preliminaries completed, the actual weaving may begin. Notice that on the loom the design is placed sideways. When used to cover the wall of a room — for added warmth or for decoration — a tapestry was often an extremely large horizontal rectangle. It was more practical to use a loom the width of the narrower dimensions. Thus the warp threads ran parallel to the long edge of the tapestry.

There are other advantages to weaving in this manner. (1) When weaving figures, the craftsman is able to see the entire figure though it is in a horizontal position, even when the completed part of the tapestry is rolled (Figs. 4 and 5). (2) The long vertical lines, e.g. buildings or columns, can be produced more effectively with long weft passages, rather than with a series of very short ones, one above the other.

Before weaving is started, the warp threads form a plane extending between the upper and lower beams of the loom. When looking at a cross-section, the edge of this plane appears as a vertical line. To proceed with the process of weaving, however, alternate warp threads must be separated into two planes in order that the bobbin carrying the weft can be passed first behind one set of threads and then the other. The two planes are separated by a pole called the shed pole placed at right-angles across the warp with one set of warp threads on either side. The space between the two sets of threads is called the shed. Instead of seeing one vertical line, one now sees two lines, forming the shape of a "V," which emerges from the top of the woven portion and reaches upwards to either side of the shed pole. Therefore, the distance between the two sets of warp threads, or the size of the shed, changes from nil

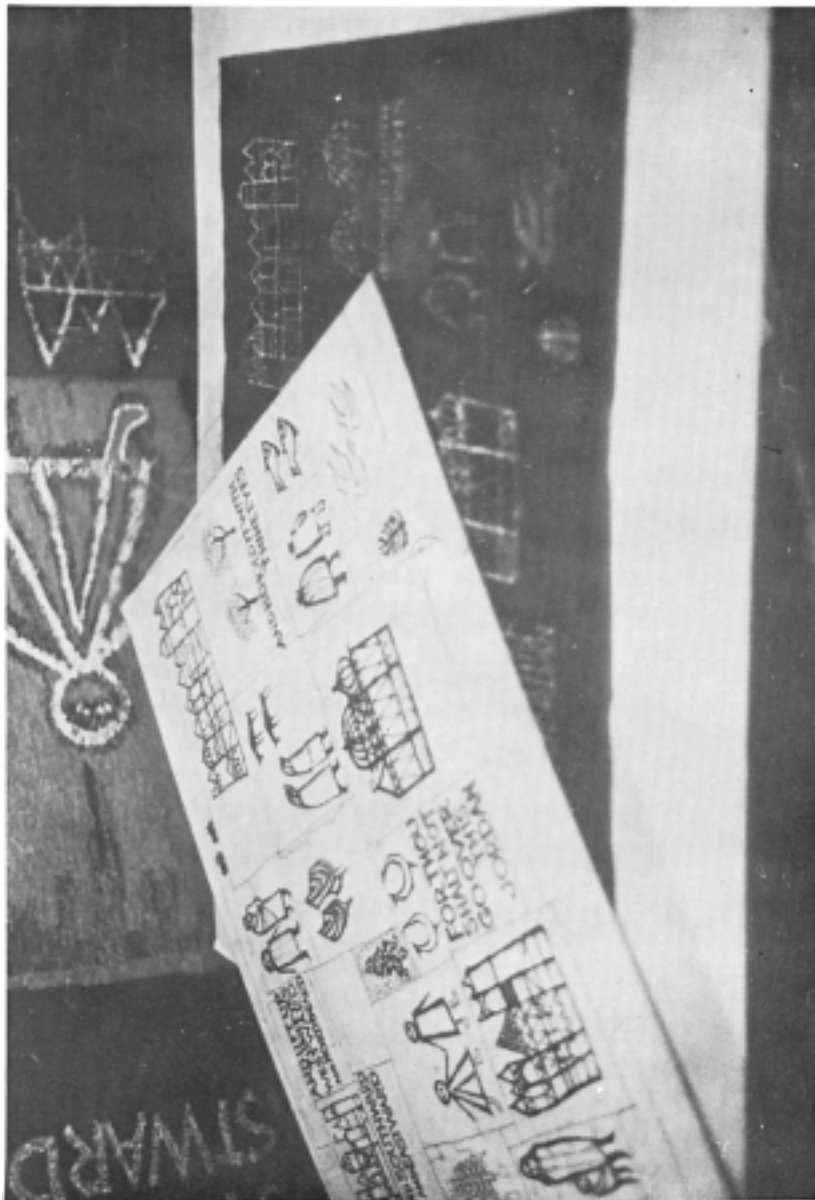


Fig. 2. Black and white tracing on clear plastic (placed over white paper) with artist's colored sketch and the partially completed tapestry in the background.



Fig. 3. Inking-on process. Maureen Hodge, designer-weaver, kindly allowed photographs to be made as she worked.



Fig. 4. *Raising the Standard at Glenfinnan.*



Fig. 5. *Raising the Standard at Glenfinnan* (showing the rolled portion).

at the top weft thread to the diameter of the shed pole several inches above (Fig. 1).

As the bobbin is always passed behind the front set of threads and in front of those at the back, the position of the threads must be reversed each time the bobbin carries a weft thread. Looped around each warp on the back plane (the one furthest from the weaver) is a cord or leash, tied to a pole (seen immediately above the heads of the men in Figure 1) which can be raised as work progresses. As the weaver pulls on these leashes, the threads at the back are forced into the forward position. When the bobbin is passed, therefore, it will go behind this alternate set of threads.

Figures 6, 7, 8 and 9 illustrate the weaving process.

In Figure 6 the weaver holds the appropriate threads (those nearest her) to allow her bobbin to pass behind them from right to left. In Figure 7 she prepares to pull forward the alternate threads (those furthest from her). This is done by using the appropriate warp threads as a guide; as she follows them upwards, her hand will reach the corresponding set of leashes. When these leashes have been pulled, the threads from the back plane are brought forward, permitting the bobbin to be passed behind them from left to right. Figure 8 shows the threads in this position just after the bobbin has passed. After each row the weft must be tightly pressed down, leaving no opening between the horizontal rows (Fig. 9).

There is, naturally, a vertical slit between warp threads wherever one color ends and another begins. These slits may be closed as weaving progresses by (a) passing the weft threads from opposite directions in alternation around their common boundary warp so that they dovetail, or (b) interlocking the weft threads from opposite directions between the two boundary warps. Or, on completion of the tapestry, the edges of the slits may be whipped together.

The technique described immediately above is used currently at the Dovecot Studios. However, Archie Brennan, the master weaver, is presently developing a new process and fitment for looms to bring together the advantages of different techniques and to remove the disadvantages.

The time required to weave a particular section of *Flight into Egypt* can be gauged by comparing Figure 3 with Figure 6. The photographs were taken two days apart. The weekly average can range from one to four square feet per weaver.

The warp threads are almost always of cotton while the weft is woven



Fig. 6. Passing the bobbin from right to left.



Fig. 7. Using warp threads as a guide for reaching the appropriate leashes for the next row.



Fig. 8. Bobbin has just been passed from left to right.



Fig. 9. Pressing down the weft with tip of bobbin.

with wool, cotton, silk, flax, jute, metallic, and synthetic fibers. These different fibers, as well as different colors, are often wound on one bobbin.

A portion of an unfinished tapestry, *Raising the Standard at Glenfinnan* can be seen at the Dovecot Studios. It depicts Bonnie Prince Charlie and some of his Highland followers in 1745. Only the middle portion, indicated by the motif at the top center of the border, can be seen, as the completed half is rolled up so that the part currently being worked is at eye level for the weaver (Figs. 4 and 5).

Figure 4 shows the partial figure of the Prince. Because this is an historical subject, the correct portrayal of the figures involved extensive research. Some of the designer's information was obtained from letters, written between 1792 and 1834, to the firm of William Wilson and Son in Bannockburn, Stirlingshire, Scotland. It was the sample enclosed in the letter below which provided the designer with information for the appropriate tartan for Prince Charlie.

Edinburgh
September 30th 1826

Mr. Wm Wilson & Son

Gentlemen

We have heard you have furnished for the Officers of the 72nd rg their regimental tartans. We are in want of a piece exactly to their patterns and quality.

Have the goodness to send us a piece accordingly but we will require to have here Twenty yards in about eight days . . . pray lose no time in setting about it.

Enclosed you have pattern of . . . large pattern Stewart and request you will send us a piece in three weeks. We will trust to have this . . .

Your Obedt Serv
for Meyer & Quilles
R. Cummings

Figure 10 shows the letter, the sample, and a labelled card to which are attached the colored yarns selected to reproduce the tartan. Although tartans of specific patterns were used by clans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, no formal record of the designs was kept.

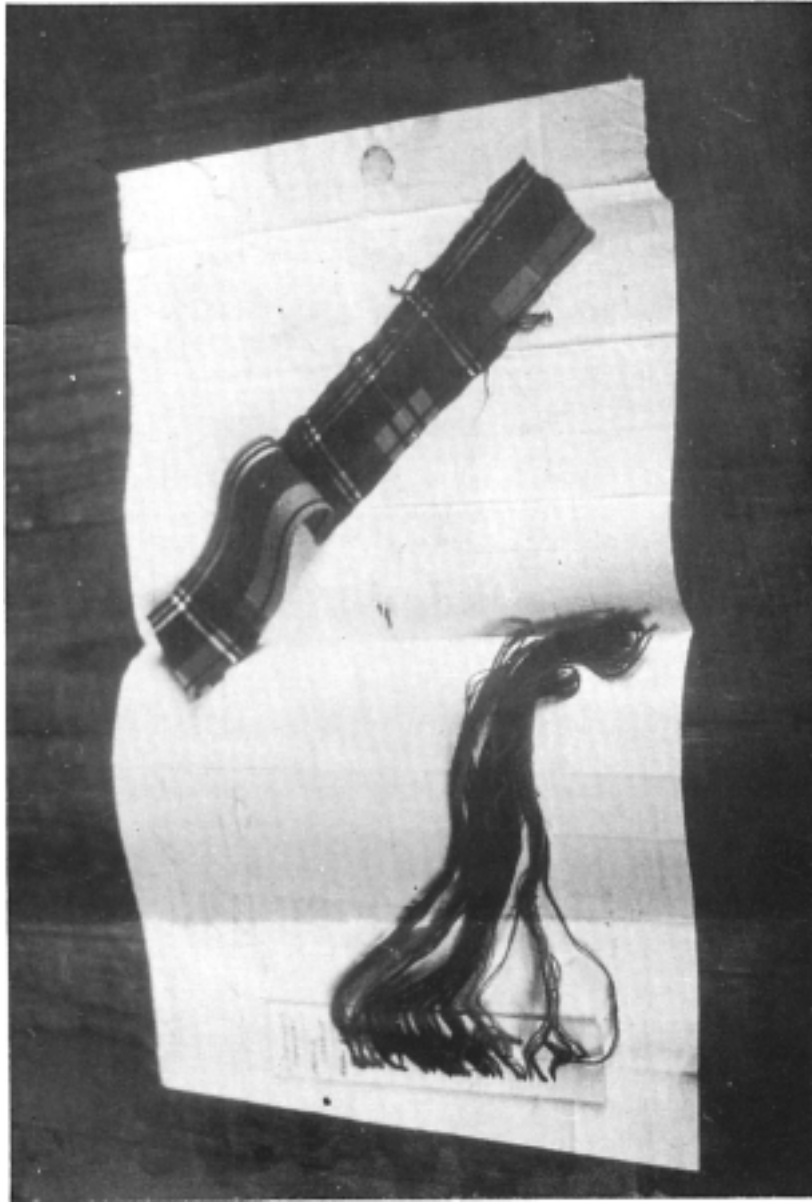


Fig. 10. Letter, sample, and card with selected colors for reproducing tartan.

Another tapestry with historical interest is that showing a birdseye view of Edinburgh in 1575 (Figs. 11 and 12). The wide strip running parallel to the caption, in Figure 11, represents the water of a loch which has since been transformed into the Princes Street Gardens. The completed work is now in the Banqueting Hall of Edinburgh Castle.

A recent tapestry, measuring 18' by 9'6", designed and executed by Archie Brennan for the Council Chamber of the borough of Motherwell and Wishaw, a steel manufacturing center in Scotland, appears in Figure 13. The heraldic device with two steel workers as supporters marks the chair of the presiding officer. In the large panel, designed for this modern setting, the device is repeated but is surrounded and supported by a network of steel bars.

The work of the Dovecot Studios is represented in various parts of the United States. One example may be seen in St. Thomas Episcopal Church, New York, while private collections throughout the country include tapestries adapted from the designs of Stanley Spencer, Cecil Collins, and Graham Sutherland. The work of Archie Brennan, himself, has contributed not a little to the prestige of the Scottish weavers. Throughout this country, there are at least six hangings designed and executed by him which attest to the artistic ability and skill of a modern creative master weaver.

In a land where wools and weaving have long been a part of daily life, this small group of artists keeps alive an ancient craft. In volume of work they cannot compete with larger European establishments but because of the intimate nature of their workshop in Edinburgh, their tapestries have a special character with a very Scottish flavor.

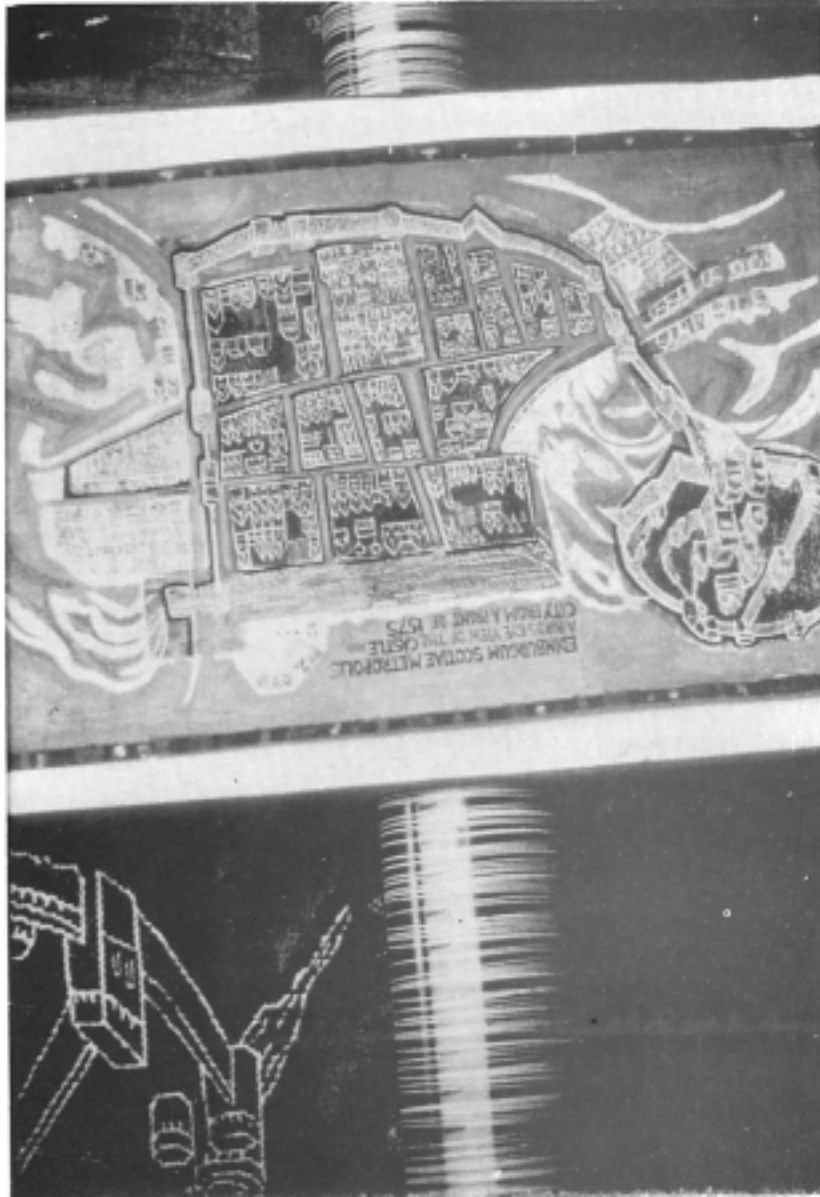


Fig. 11. *Edinburgh.*

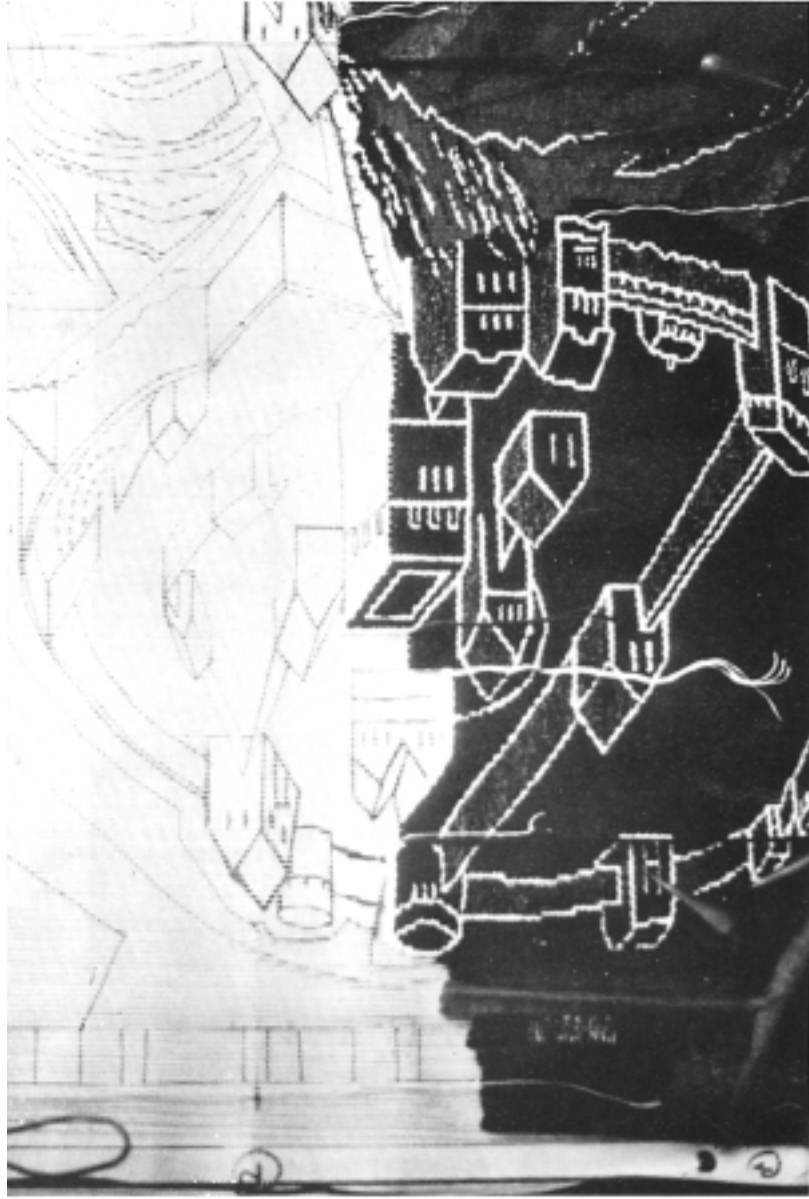


Fig. 12. *Edinburgh.*

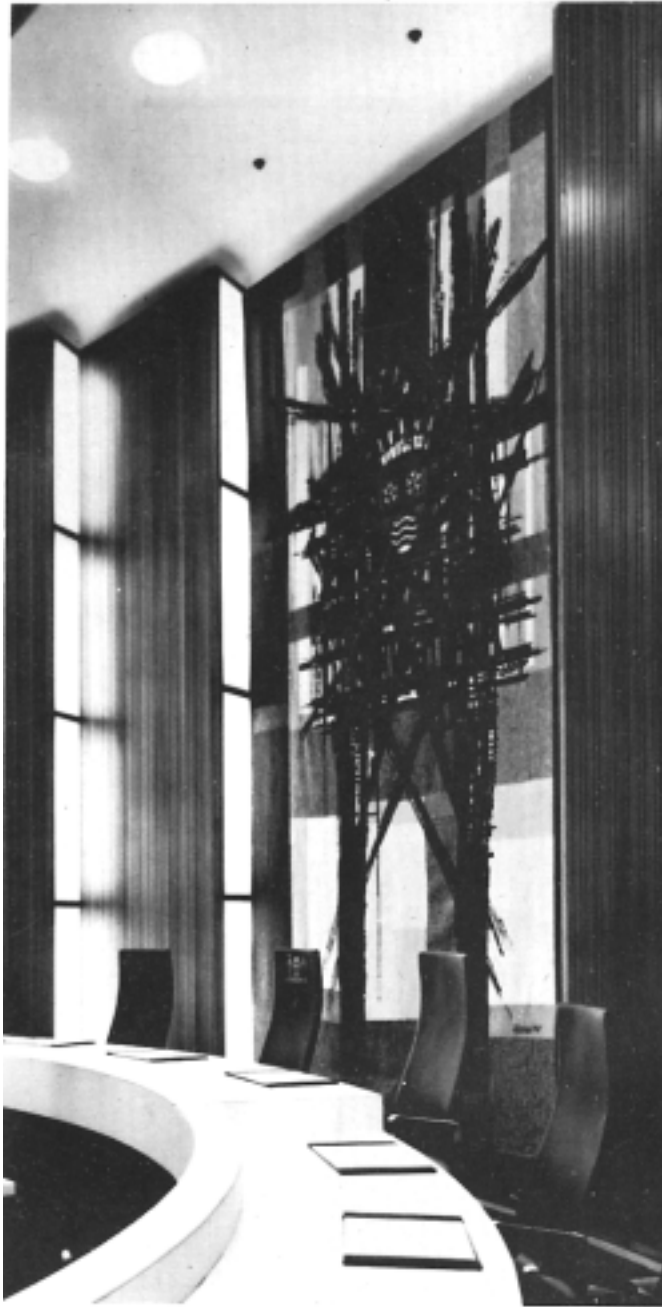


Fig. 13. Council Chamber of the borough of Motherwell and Wishaw.

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