TAPESTRY THROUGH THE AGES

TAPESTRY IN EGYPT

By Adele Coulin Weibel

(Reprinted witht the permission of the author from TWO THOUSAND YEARS OF TEXTILES, by Adele Coulin Weibel, published for The Detroit Institute of Arts, Pantheon Books, New York, 1952, $20.00.)

Most important of all the elaborations of simple weaves is tapestry. It differs from the other weaves in which the shuttle is thrown across the whole width of the warp, from selvage to selvage, and is the least mechanical of all forms of weaving, really an intrinsic form of embroidery directly onto the warp. The weaver uses a number of bobbins, one for each of the different colors he needs. Each bobbin is taken only as far as its color is required and then turned back. If two color areas meet in a vertical line, a slit occurs. These slits can be avoided by the designer of the pattern; or by the weaver, by dovetailing the adjoining colors or by interlocking the weft threads of two colors at the meeting points. Sometimes, as in the Asiatic *kelims,* the slits are left open as part of the pattern, producing a play of light and shadow. In the European pictorial tapestries the slits are simply sewed together on the back after the weaving is finished. The weft threads are only very slightly twisted and much heavier than the warps, which they cover completely. A careful weaver will wrap loose ends around empty warps and thus produce a fabric that is alike on obverse and reverse.

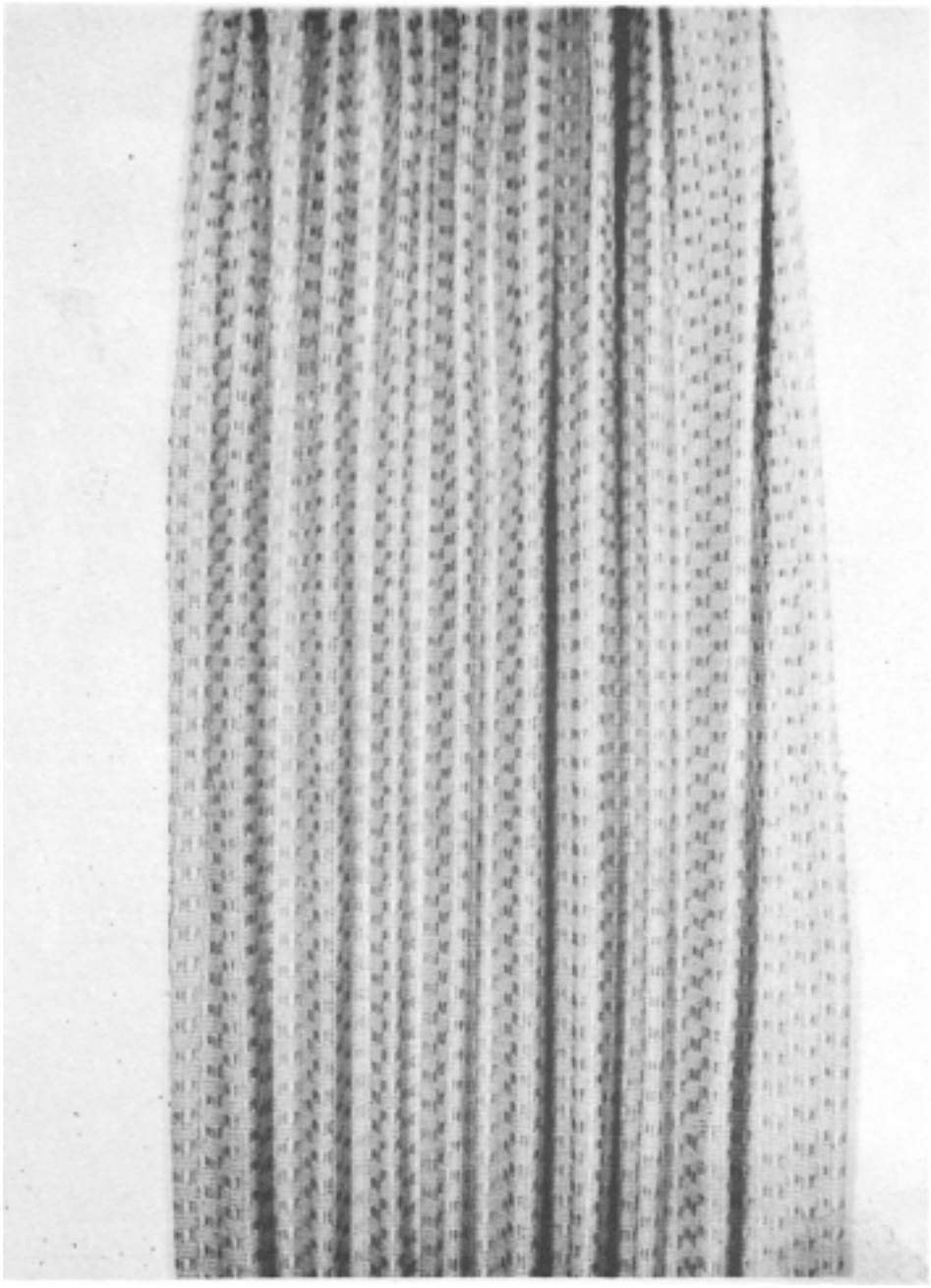
Tapestry weaving is universal and can be traced far back in the history of mankind. When Homer tells of Helen

> weaving a web full ample,
> Two fold, purple; and into it many a battle she'd woven
> Battles of Troy's steed-tamers and bronze-mailed sons of Achaeans
> (*The Iliad of Homer* translated by William Benjamin Swift and Walter Miller. New York 1944, book III, lines 125-27)

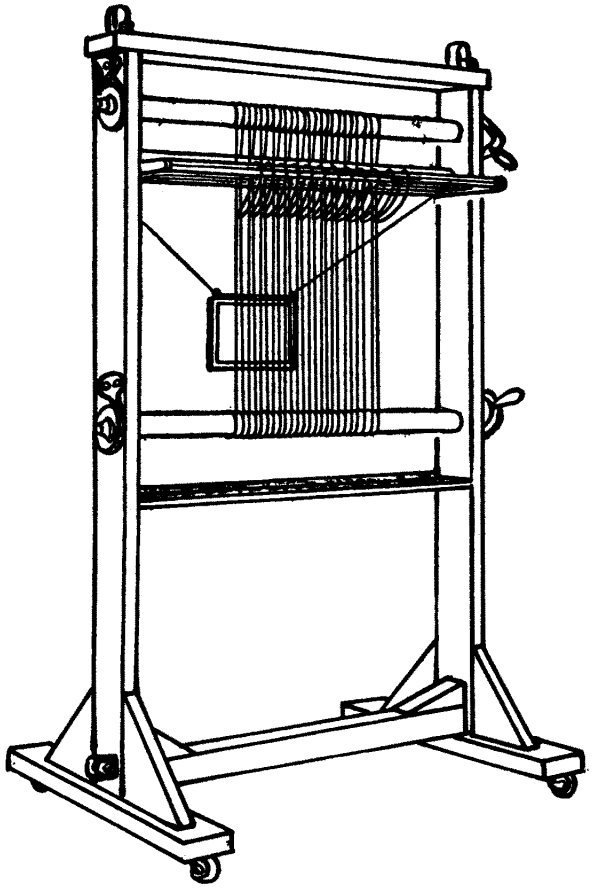
he probably refers to tapestry weaving. For until the invention of the drawloom, this was the only technique for the weaving of elaborate, polychrome patterns.

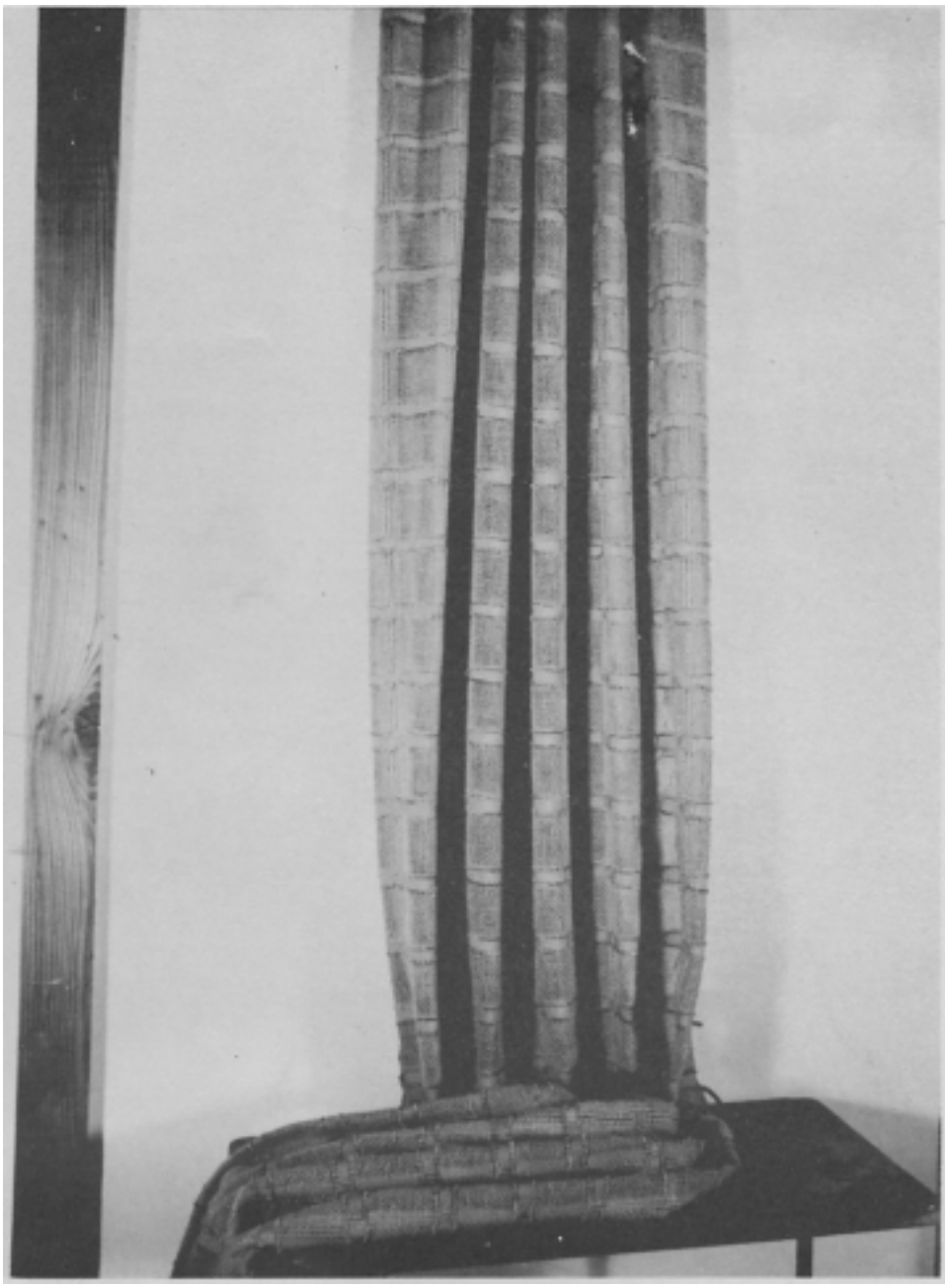
The Kashmir shawls of India are woven in twill tapestry. The wefts pass under one and over two or three warps and are interlocked with the wefts of the adjoining area. These beautiful fabrics are reversible.

The earliest preserved pattern-woven textiles are three linen cloths discovered in the tomb of Thutmose IV (reigned c. 1420-1412 B C) at Thebes. The largest and most important of these shows the cartouche of Amenhotep II



Sample on next page.





Sample on next page.

(c. 1447-1420 B C) among rows of papyrus and lotus blossoms, another the cartouche of Thutmose III (c. 1479-1447 B C). The patterns are woven in tapestry technique of colored, mostly red and blue, linen thread; quite rightly, for Egypt was the country where the finest flax was grown.

About a thousand years later a change in taste infiltrated into Egypt through foreign traders and settlers and the temporary Persian occupation of the country. Pharoanic art was dead even before the Ptolemaic period (323-30 B C). The Romans found in their new province of Egypt an art congenial to them, one of many variants of the eclectic Hellenistic-Oriental art.

The use of wool for ornamental wefts was a Hellenistic innovation in Egypt, where, since predynastic times, sheep had been bred only for meat and for trampling seed into the mud after the annual inundation of the Nile. The new wool fiber made possible a far-wider range of color and, once the weaver had overcome the difficulty of using the same warp with wefts of different tension, linen wefts for the body of the fabric, wool wefts for the decorated parts, it actually made his work easier. The heavier woolen wefts, inserted more slackly and beaten tightly, covered the linen warps and presented a practically unbroken surface. This type of weaving came to Egypt from Syria. A Greek tomb of the third century B C at Kerch, in Crimea, has yielded some fragmentary textiles, the earliest specimens of wool tapestry. One of these shows rows of ducks swimming on "the purple sea"; an almost three-dimensional effect is obtained by subtle graduation of color. Such shading is a specialty of the Syrian weavers. It is found again in a large cloth (preserved in the Musee des Tissus, Lyons, France), possibly of the Ptolemaic period, tapestry woven throughout, covered with fishes of diverse kinds, swimming to and fro and even casting their shadows on the greenish water. That the Syrian weavers even attempted the rendering of large, pictorial compositions is proved by the survival of one fragment that shows an about half-life-size head of a woman. Fabrics of such surpassing quality are always exceptional; but the tradition of shading from one color to another survived changes of fashion in Syria. Simple bands of shaded colors have been found at Palmyra and Dura-Europos.

The discovery at Palmyra of linen tunics with clavi and medallions woven in tapestry technique of wool dyed with true murex purple can be quoted as another instance of the excellence of Syrian textile art. In the many similar garments from Egyptian burial sites the ornaments are of imitation purple, with the wool dyed first with indigo and then with madder.

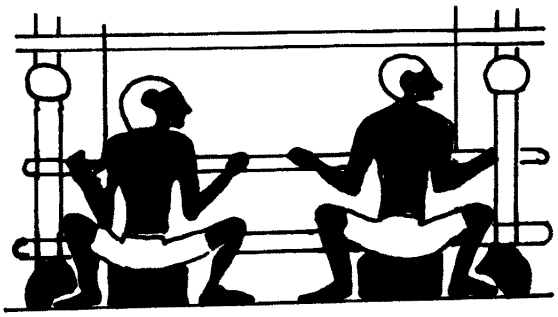
The preservation of so many tapestry-patterned textiles in Egyptian tombs of the centuries of Roman occupation is owing to the fact that, as in Pharaonic Egypt, the fertile soil of the Nile Valley was too precious to be used for burial grounds. The cemeteries were now placed at the foot of the hills, and the dry soil of this barren ground preserved the bodies and the textiles wrapped around them.

The history of Egypt for the first thousand years of the Christian era is mirrored in her textile output. The ornaments of the earliest preserved fabrics

are distinguished by their purely linear composition. According to tradition, Christianity was brought to Egypt by St Mark the Evangelist, who preached the Gospel in Alexandria about A D 59. The new creed spread rapidly. The Coptic Church uses for its dating the "era of the martyrs," which begins with A D 284, the year of the accession of the Emperor Diocletian. In the fourth century, under Constantine, Christianity was officially recognized; it was declared the religion of the empire by Theodosius. From early times the word "Copts" was used to designate the Egyptian Christians.

The best Coptic textiles were woven during the fourth and fifth centuries, when Christianity had become the favored creed of the Roman Empire and the peace of the Church was not yet disturbed by the ecclesiastical quarrels. As in Graeco-Roman times, the garments worn by the Copts were still adorned with bands and separate motifs of wool tapestry on linen ground, but now the decoration often lacked the subtle moderation of the earlier period.

In the sixth century the polychromy becomes more and more unbridled; but there is also a return to monochrome tapestry. There the ornament now often consists of two superimposed squares, forming an octagonal star. The twisted ribbon, the guilloche, appears, not only in tapestries but in related crafts such as mosaics and illumination. These are the first truly Byzantine designs.



These words from Mrs. Weibel, and the plate on the center sheet, are our introduction to a series of articles on one of the most important branches of textile art—tapestry weaving. A more fascinating story than that found in tapestries of the last thirty-five centuries, woven the world around, could hardly be found. And it is a story which is vitally important to handweavers, because tapestry weaving is an art form which once again is living under a rising star. There are many chapters to the tapestry story: the history of the craft, with the stories of the great tapestries of the past and their weavers and designers, its various developments and declines, the technical aspects of tapestry or the "How To Do It," and the philosophy and manner of approach in the several schools of modern tapestry weaving. The complete tapestry story can be told only by many people. A number of leading tapestry weavers and designers on both sides of the Atlantic have therefore agreed to bring their art to SHUTTLE CRAFT readers through a series of articles we have planned. This will be our sustained subject for many months to come: a symposium on tapestry weaving in all its aspects.