

Drapery Materials, Models for Industrial Production, by Ruth Bailey, Don Page, Agatha Schurman, Students of Black Mountain College

HANDWEAVING TODAY

Textile Work at Black Mountain College by ANNI ALBERS

Almost all textiles today are products of machine looms. They are turned out in great quantities, at high speed. Quantity and speed reflect on the design. In general we think today of more and more, of faster and faster, and only then of better and better.

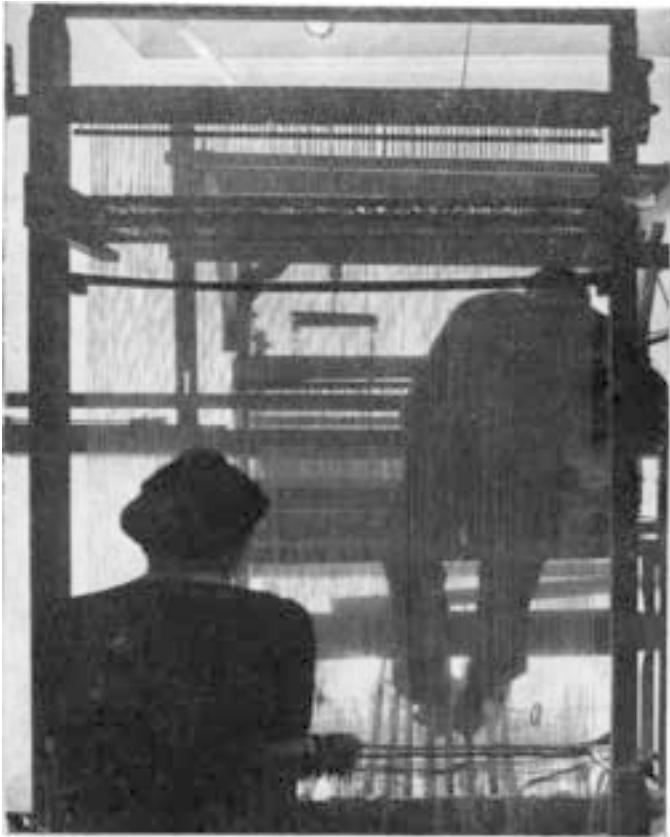
In this situation the attempt to deal with textiles on a small scale, in a slow manner, with quality mainly in mind, may seem rather futile. This may appear to be retreat and seclusion, but actually have quite a different result. It is true that such work is often no more than a romantic attempt to recall a *temps perdu*, a result rather of an attitude than of procedure. But, if conceived as a preparatory step to machine production the work will be more than the revival of a lost skill and will take responsible part in a new development.

Handweaving the slow, and machine-weaving the fast method of the same process contrast only in velocity. Sameness of procedure is one of the justifications for handwork preliminary to work for mass production. Weaving in any form is a constructive process; it is also a combinative

process demanding aesthetic judgment as to surface, form and color qualities of the materials. Other problems enter, such as functional and social demands. All of these factors engage intellect and imagination if the craft is looked upon as still in formation.

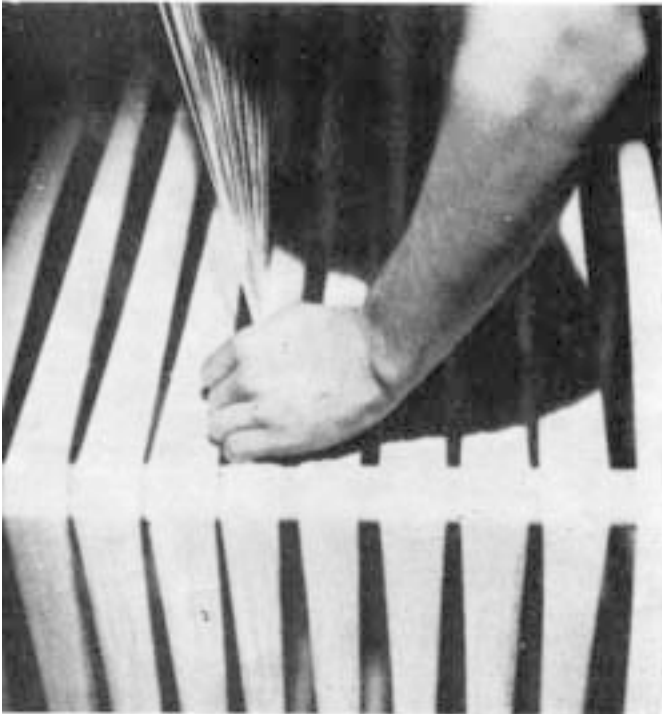
Unfortunately today handweaving has degenerated in face of technically superior methods of production. Instead of freely developing new forms, recipes are often used, traditional formulas, which once proved successful. Freshness of invention, of intelligent and imaginative forming has been lost. If handweaving is to regain actual influence on contemporary life, approved repetition has to be replaced with the adventure of new exploring.

Such an attempt needs a careful foundation. It is only possible if we go back to the elements. Materials have accumulated to themselves set rules of working them. In going back to the fundamental principles we can open the field again for invention, imaginative use of intellectually recognized facts.

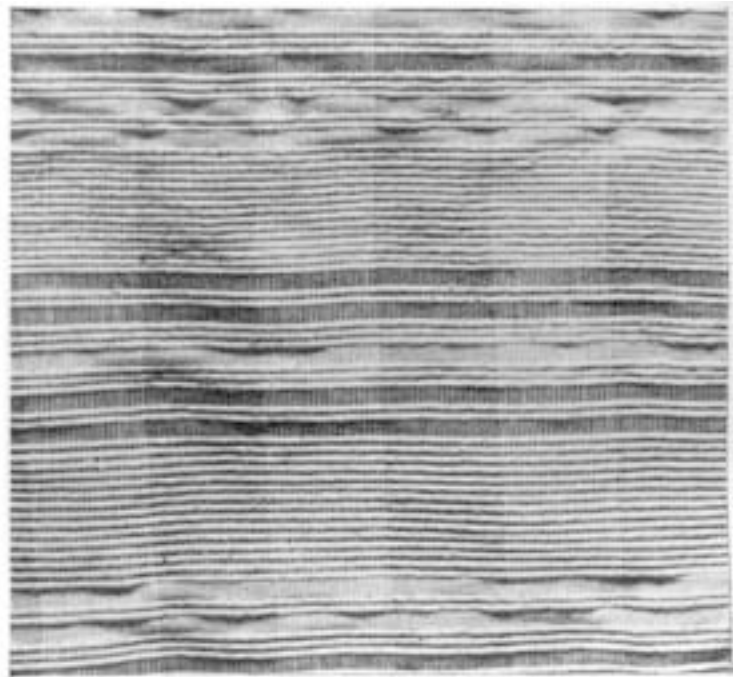


In the Weaving Department of Black Mountain College

We have stated before that hand and machine weaving are fundamentally the same. The theory of the constructive process, the draftwriting, can therefore be taught so as to include both hand and machine possibilities. Handlooms today are often limited technically. Why fit the theoretical knowledge to the present limitations of handweaving? Rather the theoretical work should be developed, expanding



Making Up the Warp



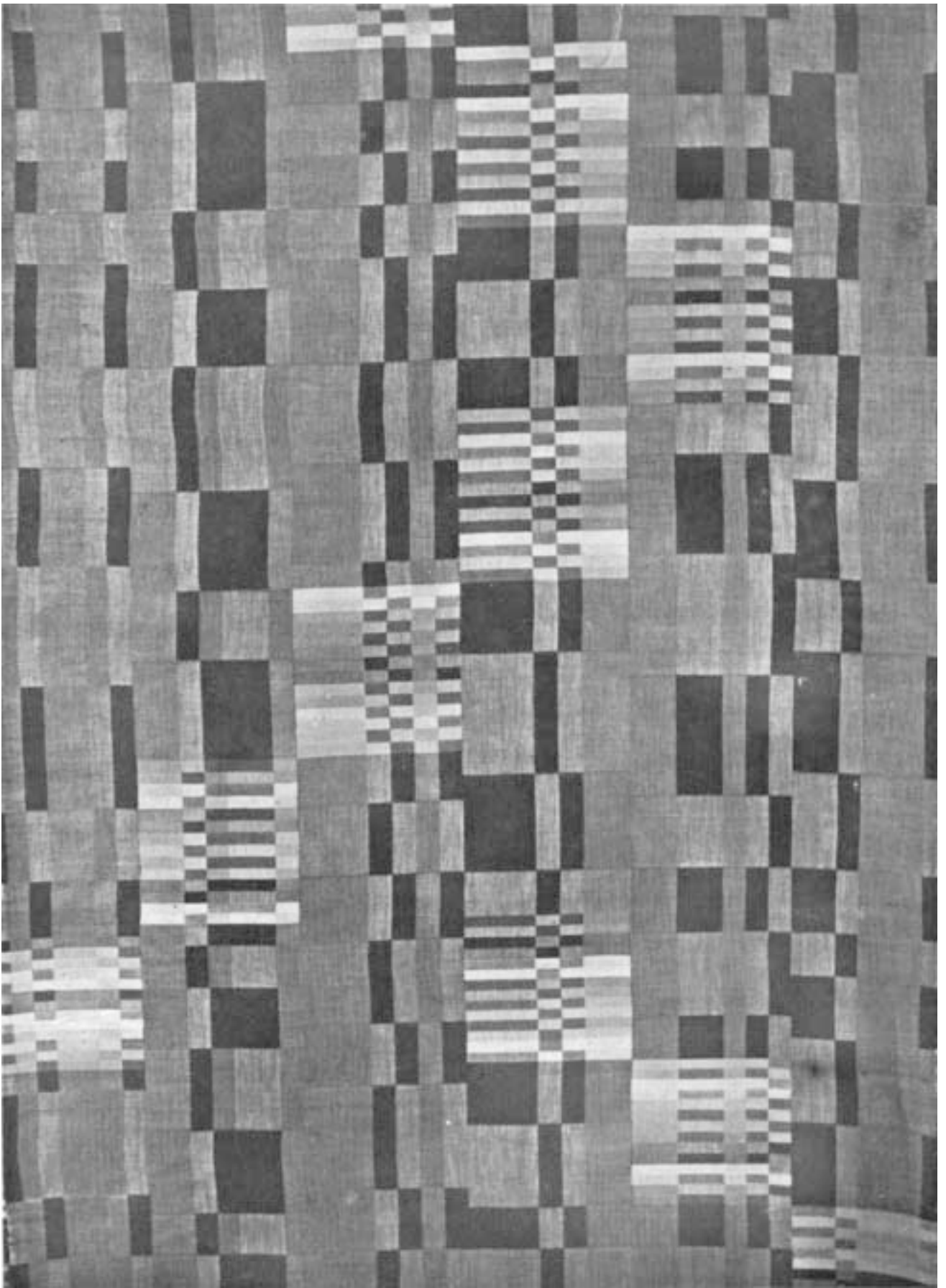
Experiment for Drapery Material by Eva Zbitlowsky, student of Black Mountain College

beyond the boundaries set to it now, in order to stimulate new experimentation. The teaching should be the development of structures, from the elementary weaves to more complicated derivations rather than the passing on of patterns for weaving. Thus the work can be directed toward independent initiative.

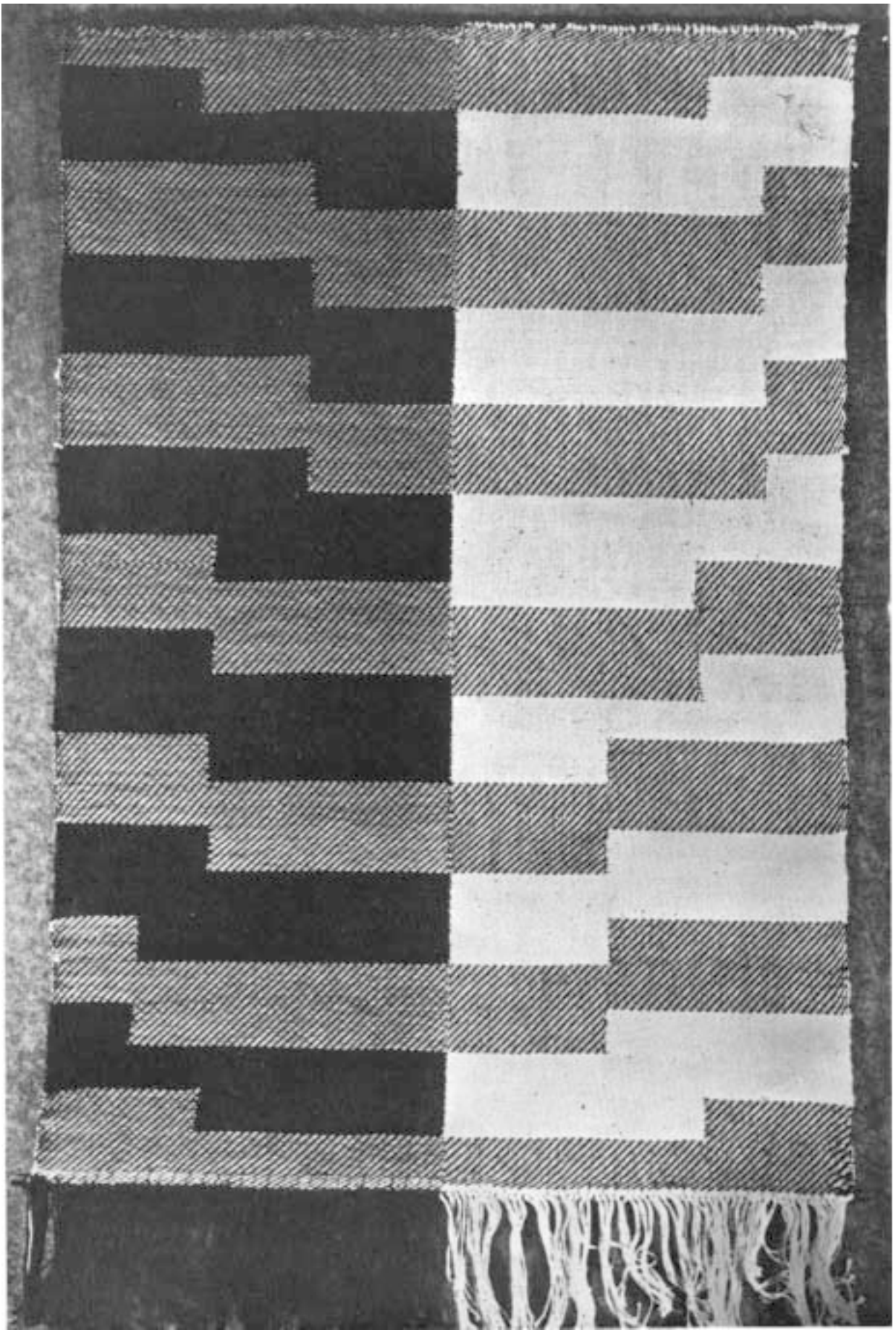
The same return to the fundamentals needed for the structural work is also necessary for the combinative or aesthetic side of it, to clear the way for new forming. For the lack of invention often found in the handweaving of today is a general symptom of this time of standardization. If teaching attempts to direct the development of individuals as well as of peoples, it should try to avert a growing one-sidedness which may prove fatal. For ability to form materials presupposes responsiveness towards the material, a flexibility of reaction, and this flexibility is one of the factors we will need for times to come. Through working with material we can perhaps develop this ability to respond. More than intangible material, than tones or words, tangible material can teach that it has demands of its own and suggestions of its own for its forming, that it asks for a reaction. Creating means this reacting to material rather than the execution of a dream, as the layman conceives it. The first vision of something to be done gives more the mood of the work than its final form. The form emerges as the work progresses.

An elementary approach will be a playful beginning, unresponsive to any demand of usefulness, an enjoyment of colors, forms, surface contrasts and harmonies, — a tactile sensuousness. This first and always most important pleasure in the physical qualities of materials needs but the simplest technique and must be sustained through the most complicated one. For just this satisfaction coming from material qualities is part of the satisfaction we get from art.

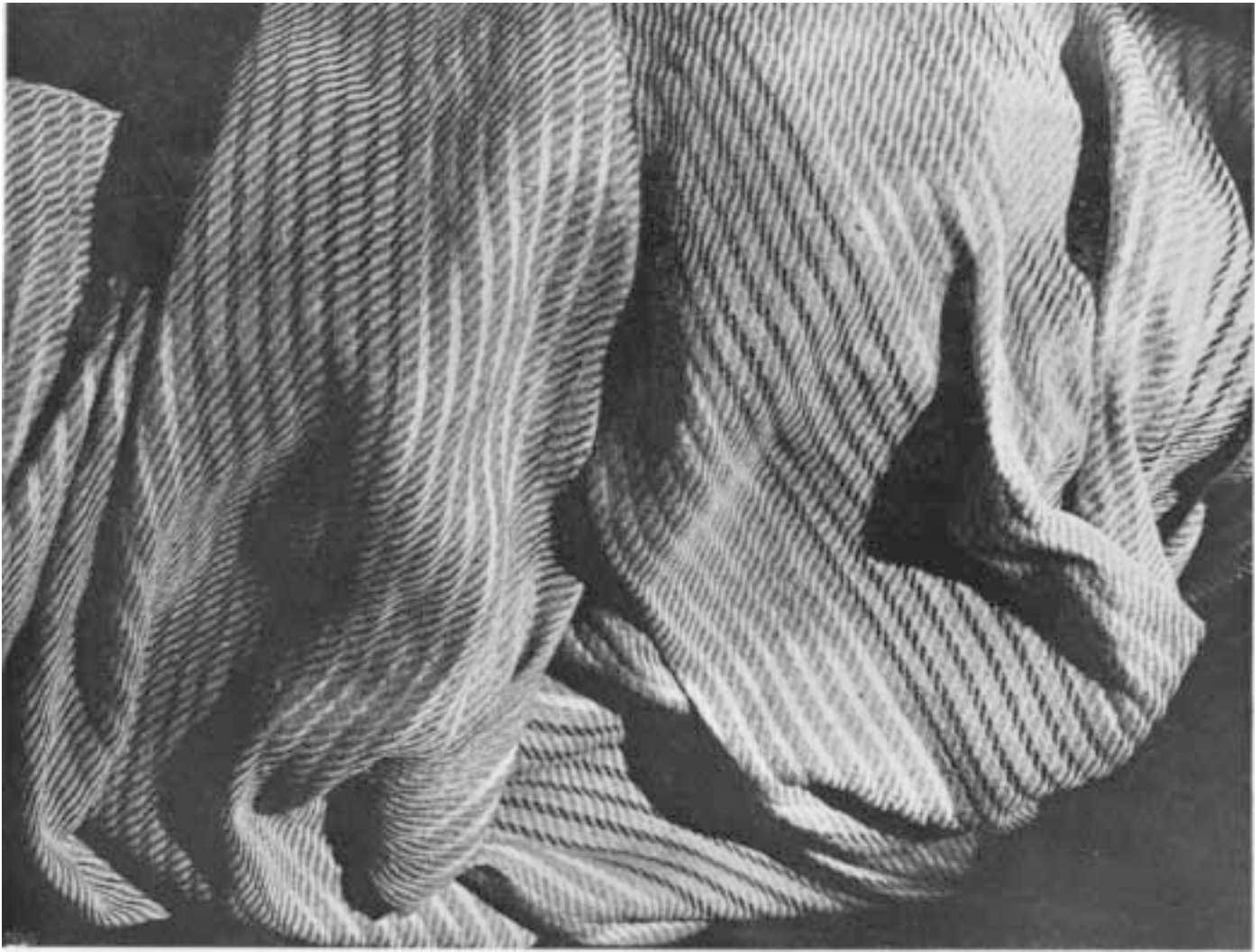
For more advanced work considerations of utilitarian purpose arise. Although for the beginner the thought of practical usefulness has more a constraining than animating effect, conscious deliberations on function and useful objective are in a later stage stimulating, as is the material itself.



Wall Hanging, double weave, by Don Page, Student of Black Mountain College



Tapestry by Alex Reed, Student of Black Mountain College



Display Material by Anni Albers

Demands set by the practical use give the work a certain direction, unthought of before the problem came up, as to construction, choice of material, color and form. An example: The task of weaving a material to be used as wallcovering sets up certain requirements, strongly influenced by the specific tendencies of a period. It brings up the question of a light or dark material, light-reflective maybe, of resistance to dust, the question how it is to be attached to the wall. The answer will probably eliminate fuzzy fibers, loose, stretchable, plastic textures, and suggest straw-like qualities and a stiff, smooth, close construction of weave. The search for the fiber best uniting the requisite qualities may lead to one not used for weaving before. The experiments can result in a fabric equipped with new characteristics, a new fabric.

Awareness of the need for adaptation to purpose introduces one other factor: the importance of recognizing new problems as they appear, of foreseeing a development. "An unspecialized aptitude for eliciting generalizations from particulars and for seeing the divergent illustrations of generalities in diverse circumstances is required. Such a reflective power is essentially a philosophic habit," says Whitehead. The creative impetus, at first coming sensuously from the world of appearance, now receives its stimulus from the intellectual sphere of a recognized need. Only the imaginative mind can transform the intellectual recognition into a material form.

The special inclinations of certain times play a dominant part in the rise of new forms. Today's interest in hygiene, in light, in movable things, in short-lived things even, as far as the serviceable objects of our surrounding are con-

cerned, become manifest in the objects we make. For textiles this means washable materials, transparent or light-reflective ones, materials repelling dust or water, reversible ones and materials which can easily be replaced. For durability need not necessarily be a value in itself, although this seemed a valuation set forever. Accumulation of material values rapidly loses its charm in face of the mutation of a world; thus durability is no longer equivalent to value. There is a close correlation between demands arising in the course of time, being fulfilled by new materials, and new materials bringing about new demands. In the one case the demand acts as motive power, in the other the pleasure of free forming. Fulfillment of a demand confines a product to usefulness — the result of free forming can be art.

Handweaving can go both ways; to become art it needs nothing but its own high development and adjustment in all its properties, — to become utilitarian it needs today the help of machines if it is to be more than a mere luxury.

There is one other aspect of the work, one not intrinsically connected with the idea of future development; it is that of handweaving as a leisure-time occupation and as a source of income in rural communities. The importance of such work should not be overlooked. But it is necessary to keep in mind that handweaving here takes on the character of a means to an end and is not in itself the center of interest. It has to be admitted that at one point we discussed handweaving also as a means, when taking its educational value into account, shifting the emphasis from the result to the process. But the objective was to encourage experimenting which leads back to the core of these considerations.