TEXTURE INDENTITY IN WEAVING

by HENNING–REES

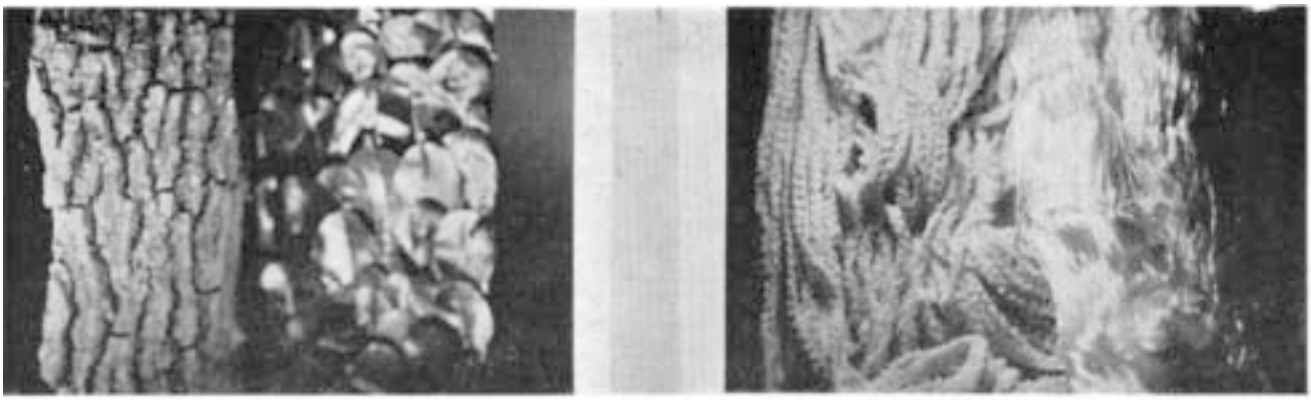

Illustration No. 1. Parallels in nature textures and thread textures: the rough, dull bark and the same qualities in heavy cotton chenille; smooth, shiny Mirror Plant leaves and the same qualities in spun rayon.

How is a textile planned? Is a new weaving going to be the result of trying out a new pattern weave or a variation of an old one; or is the new weaving going to be really new, the product of our own imagination woven on the loom out of materials which the machine age has given us?

There are two methods we may employ in designing textiles: We may either let the loom dictate to us, or we may dictate to the loom. The first method means taking old patterns and varying them with modern materials to see what may come out of the experiment. The second method depends upon a knowledge of color and texture, the real design elements. These elements are the governing factors in developing a textile idea and the loom is employed to produce the idea for us. The second method allows us more freedom in creating because we are not hampered at the start with the mechanical limitations of a machine. But the second method depends for its success on our working knowledge of the designing elements, color and texture. If we are going to do something new, of ourselves, we must work from the colors and textures of the weaving materials themselves. With this approach we will find the new weaving possibilities of the loom.

The textured surface is the simplest and most direct surface the loom produces. Usually when we say "textured surface" we mean a rough surface. This, however, is not the true meaning of the word texture. Every surface has a texture quality, whether it be rough or smooth. And this quality reveals itself to us in two ways: through the eye or through the hand, by seeing or by touching. Most of the time we identify surfaces by using both of the senses, for often a surface is contradictory and it is necessary to use both senses to indentify it. Haven't you seen glass objects which have been treated so your eye could no longer recognize them as glass? The old Victorian Easter eggs with the scenes inside them are examples of this sort of surface; they were made of glass to look like sugar. When one looked at the egg its surface appeared to be sugar and one could only find out for sure by touching it. Thus two of your faculties were employed to identify its surface, and it had both visual and tactile surface texture. In some of the crafts only one of the senses is employed to determine texture. Painting uses only visual texture because it is a graphic craft; it is done on a flat surface. Weaving employs both visual and tactile texture because it is a plastic craft.

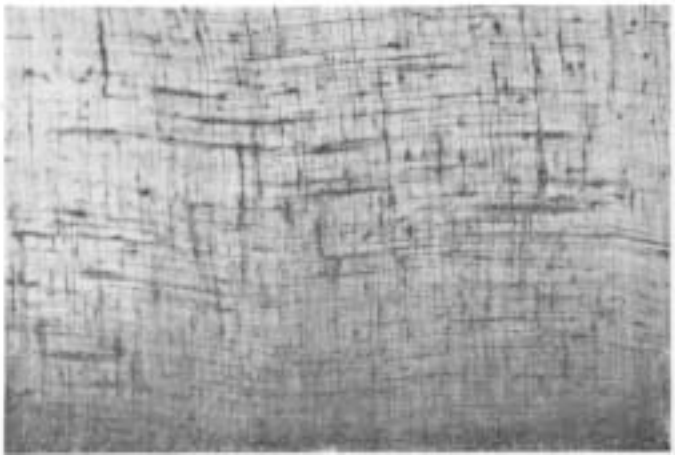

Illustration No. 2. The texture which the uneven spin gave to this linen thread was not lost in the weaving.

Every thread has a visual and a tactile texture quality. These qualities are often very beautiful in themselves, certainly beautiful enough to warrant making the effort to capture them in a weaving. Look among the threads you have been using in your weaving and see if there isn't one worthy of weaving by itself just for its own beauty of texture. Perhaps you will have some heavy silks or raw silks with their dull-sheen surfaces, or some looped or bumpy rayons, or some loosely spun or slubby linens. Isn't there one thread beautiful enough in itself to be worth weaving in a way that will bring out its own intrinsic texture quality?

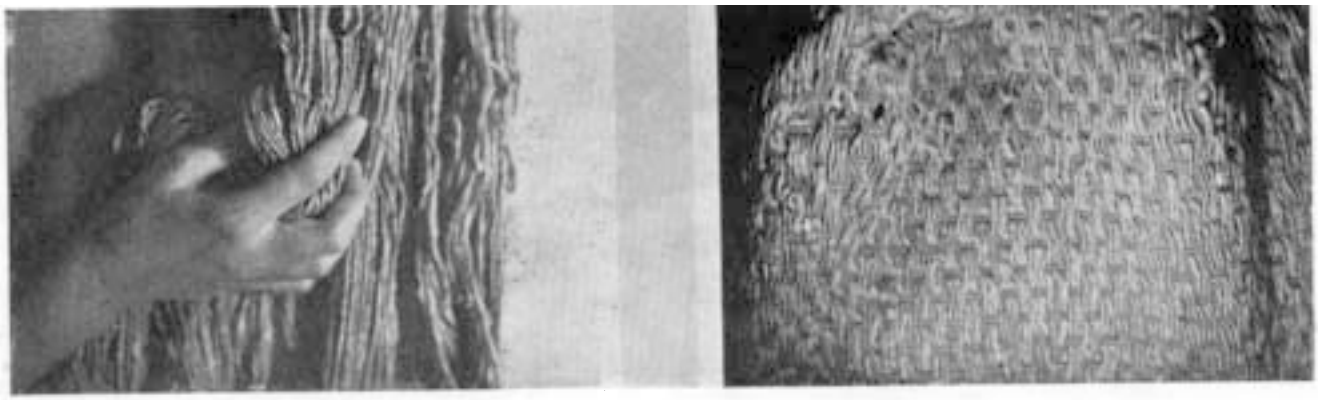

Illustration No. 3. The beauty this heavy silk had in the skein was not destroyed when it was put into cloth.

Illustrated are textures created with this idea in mind. In all of these textiles the thing the eye sees first is the quality of the material itself, not the way the fabric has been put together by the loom.

To capture the identity of a thread in a weaving requires a different solution for each material used. This is how we find the new mechanical possibilities of the loom. We cannot take a standard pattern such as Summer and Winter or Monksbelt and do this, for as soon as the mechanical aspects of the loom become dominant in the fabric the texture identity of the material is destroyed. As soon as the important thing of a fabric surface is the line, circle, or square which a pattern threading weaves material into, the eye can see nothing else. So the simpler a texture is presented to the eye the easier it will be to see its beauty. The objective in solving the technical problems of presenting a textured thread in fabric form is to discover how to incorporate it into a sturdy and practical textile and at the same time lose none of its particular beauty. Usually the texture quality is lost if the thread is packed into the cloth. This is the main technical objection to pattern weaves. Tabby weave is successful when a loose fabric is desired, as in illustration number 2. The weave makes a strong surface and the looseness allows the thread to be seen. If the thread had been packed into the surface of the fabric, the eye would not have been able to perceive it at all and its identity would have been lost.

Where an opaque fabric is desired, the problem is more complicated. Here we can employ a subordinate plain thread to act as the background upon which the important texture thread is to be built. The principle of double cloth weave can be used to advantage here: the important thread is anchored to a second fabric woven at the same time. This allows the important thread to be woven very loosely so it may be easily seen by the eye, and yet it is an opaque fabric. All the rest of the examples presented here are variations of this idea. Notice how the identity of the thread is clearly visible even in a photograph. In illustration number 3 the important thread was in the warp and was anchored to a plain back fabric. In number 5 the important textured thread was in the weft and was not actually woven into the fabric itself; it was tied to the back fabric indirectly by the warp thread with which it was woven.

Texture identity is not a new idea. Weavers from all the civilizations have practised this principle of surface enrichment and from them we have received great inspiration for our times. These weavers used such materials as grasses, feathers, woopecker scalps, leaves, and porcupine quills in their surfaces as well as the more usual wool, flax, and cotton fibers. They showed great ingenuity in adapting nature materials. It is interesting to note that only when the situation did not offer abundant variety in materials to the weaver did he turn to pattern weaving; this was the only way he could vary a limited amount of textures. Thus pattern weaving is the product of a time and is very interesting historically, but there is no reason for our repeating it now when we have such a wealth of textured threads made for us by the machine age. We will do well to employ these textures creatively and as directly as the weavers of the past have shown it possible.

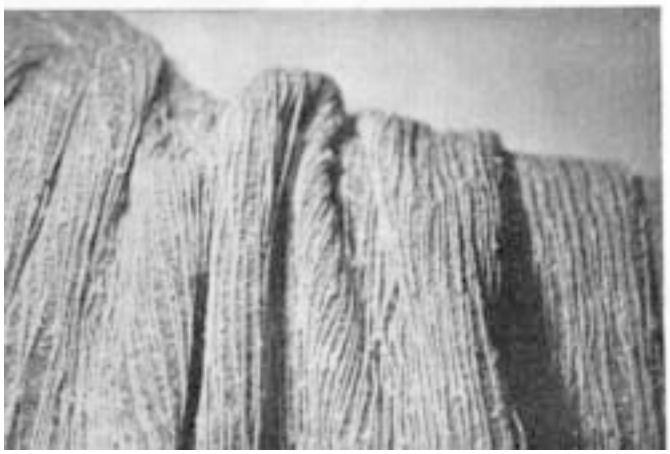

Illustration No. 4. Four inch warp overshots allow the thread to run loosely over the surface and thus be seen easily by the eye.

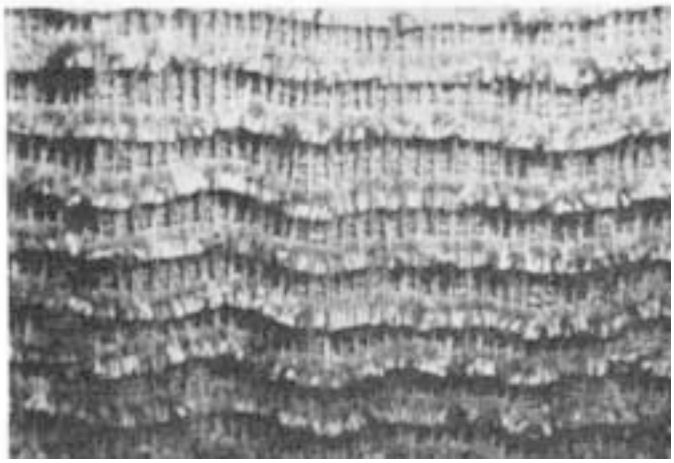

Illustration No. 5. Heavy jute chenille floats over this surface with the aid of a very subordinate warp thread. Do you see the warp or the weft thread first?