

"IT'S PRETTY -- BUT IS IT ART?"

by MARY M. ATWATER

Ed. note: Instead of our "Questions and Answers" feature by Mary M. Atwater, we present Mary M. Atwater's views on the much discussed article by Mrs. Anni Albers, "Handweaving Today."

Two articles in the January-February WEAVER of this year were interesting to me—because they dealt in an unusual way with some of the underlying problems of our craft, and because I disagreed with them so heartily. It is stimulating to disagree. And it is a good thing now and then to discuss principals, and to air one's views, so I want to say what I think about these articles and about the questions they raise.

Mrs. Anni Albers discusses the reasons for "Handweaving Today." "If," she says, "it is conceived as a preparatory step to machine production the work will be more than a revival of lost skill and will take responsible part in a new development." In illustrations accompanying the text are shown some textiles captioned "Models for Industrial Production."

I have met this quaint notion before—the idea that handweaving is of value only for making up samples to be reproduced by machinery. One might as well argue that the only reason for making an etching is as "a preparatory step" to taking a photograph. "Models" such as those exhibited can have no value or use for industry.

A handwoven textile has certain qualities that do not carry over into machine production, and it is these very qualities that give it charm. Machine weaving has its own excellent qualities, which are different, and are obtained by means far more elaborate than those available to the handweaver. Each of these main divisions of the textile art has its own particular aims, requirements, and range of possibilities. Though as Mrs. Albers says, they "are fundamentally the same", they are also divergent, and each will achieve better results by developing along its own lines than by aping the other.

An instance of this once came to my attention. A pleasantly designed rug was shown me as having been made as a "model for industrial production," and later I saw the result, lying in a long, narrow hall. There appeared to be a quarter of a mile of it, and the relentless and exact repetitions were so exceedingly painful that they were calculated to give a sensitive person the jim-jams.

A little further along in her article Mrs. Albers suggests that handweaving "may be Art" through what she calls "free-forming," without regard to "fulfillment of demand,"—by which, I take it, she means fitness for practical use.

This sounds like the old and long since discredited principal of "Art for Art's Sake," and certainly holds little inspiration for the craftsman. A "free-formed" textile, so casually constructed that it will not hold together, is really not a fabric at all, and certainly I for one should not think of calling it "Art." While to divorce a fabric from usefulness deprives it of one of its main charms, and also of all its reason for existing

Mrs. Albers thinks "playing with materials at the loom" has an educational value. No doubt this is true, but in this day we rather discount the notion that one learns one thing from doing something else. If we learn to weave we are educated in *weaving*, and if we do not wish to weave this bit of education is wasted effort.

She says—she does not appear to consider it important—that some people weave in order to sell their work and make money. This, of course, is true. It is pleasant, and sometimes

necessary, to make money. But I think Mrs. Albers is correct in thinking this a minor reason for engaging in handweaving. I have an idea that if making money is the main object, most people would make more money, with less hard work, at some occupation other than handweaving. I am very certain I should.

These, then, are the reasons for "handweaving today" in Mrs. Albers' opinion as expressed in her article: (1) the making of "models" for industry—I fancy industry would consider this a big joke!—(2) for some rather vague "educational" value, and (3) for profit in money. None of these things appear to me to be the "why" of handweaving—today or any day.

The reasons for weaving are as various as the needs, gratifications and abilities of the weavers, but I believe they boil down to this: essentially we weave because we like to do it, and in a secondary way, because we like to have our own beautiful textiles, made with our own hands, for the greater comfort and seemliness of our lives. We like to throw the shuttle; we like to beat with the batten; we enjoy combining colors and textures and decorative figures to make a brave new fabric that will be a pleasure to the eye and that will serve a practical need—the "fulfillment of demand" if you like. Doing these things gives us the pleasure of creating,—the artist's pleasure, the good craftsman's pleasure.

Why we enjoy these things is a different question. Weaving is a very ancient art and goes back to the dawn of human life on the earth. It is built into the human nervous system; it is an urge in our brains and our fingers. To give it expression brings us keen pleasure, and also an "escape" from the distresses or the hum-drum detail of our daily lives. And the value of this escape in hard and cruel times like the present can hardly be over-estimated. Mrs. Albers does not mention these reasons for "handweaving today."

A good deal of what Mrs. Albers says about developing individuality is vague to me. If she means to say that many of us are so timid or so lazy or so lacking in initiative that we tend to do the same thing over and over without trying for something new and different, she is of course entirely correct. But I do not altogether agree that, "If handweaving is to regain actual influence on contemporary life, approved repetition has to be replaced with the adventure of new exploring." "New exploring" is exciting, and is highly desirable if the explorer happens to be equipped with the technical knowledge and ability to take him somewhere, but the "new exploring" of one not so equipped is no more than a clumsy fumbling, unlikely to produce anything of value. But there are tremendous values in "approved repetition." Suppose in music every musician were to play only his own compositions: the result, I fear, would be very distressing to the ear in most cases, and we should long for "approved repetitions" from Bach or Beethoven or Strauss or Wagner.

I cannot agree with Mrs. Albers, either, when she advances the idea that durability should not, in our day, be considered important or desirable. It is true that fugitive beauty has a charm of its own, like the song that remains on the ear only while it is being sung. But the song can be sung

again, and so has a very real durability after all. A piece of music that could be heard only once would not be worth the effort of composition and rendering; and in my opinion a fabric that will not stay together a reasonable time after being taken from the loom, and that will not serve some useful purpose as an honest fabric should, would be a waste of time and material — no matter how attractive it might be in momentary effect.

The article by Henning-Rees that immediately follows Mrs. Albers' effusion might almost be a continuation of the same train of thought. In the second paragraph Mr. Henning-Rees (or is it Mrs. or Miss Henning-Rees) has this to say: "If we are going to do something new, of ourselves, we must work from the colors and textures of the weaving materials themselves." He does not explain this remarkable statement; I can think of a number of different and quite as satisfactory approaches to the problem of "newness." He also says: "we must dictate to the loom rather than allowing the loom to dictate to us." Now a loom can be persuaded to do a great many different things, if one happens to know how to use a loom, but as to "dictating!" Some things a given loom will do, and some it very definitely will not, so that in the end if you want to achieve anything, you must permit the loom to dictate — indeed you must! The loom that would accept random dictation would be a very strange thing indeed.

Continuing, Henning-Rees says: "Color and texture are the real design elements." Now if by "real" he means the *only* elements of design, — as he appears to mean — he is clearly wrong, for he omits form, line, mass, scale, balance, composition, integration, and other important "elements of design" which he either chooses to ignore or has never come to recognize.

And when he starts the following paragraph by saying: "The textured surface is the simplest and most direct surface the loom produces," he is talking pure nonsense. Any "surface" produced on a loom, or in any other manner whatsoever, is a "textured" surface. And what we make on the loom is not simply a "surface" anyway — it is two surfaces with something between. And this something between is of as much importance to the texture of a woven fabric as either of the "surfaces." Perhaps Mr. Henning-Rees did not say what he intended to say. Words are so tricky.

It is entirely true, as Henning-Rees goes on to say, that the special texture of a beautiful material may be lost in the weaving — he says by "pattern" or by beating the weft together too closely. It may also be lost, as he fails to say, by combining our handsome material with other unsuitable materials, or by using an unsuitable weave. But sometimes a woven fabric has a handsome texture that is the result of the weave and is not due entirely or even chiefly to the texture of the yarns involved. In fact the textile method of producing pleasing textures to break up the monotony of too smooth and hard a surface effect is through the device of weave rather than through the use of rough or bumpy or eccentrically spun material. Of course the latter is the easier method and requires less technical skill on the part of the weaver, but it is essentially a "lazy man's out."

We should, of course, plan our weaves to use our material to best advantage in producing the effect we have in mind, but I see no reason to assume that the chief purpose of weaving should be to display the *material* as completely as possible. If this were so, why weave at all? Why not simply hang a

skein of handsome yarn over a hook on the wall and enjoy it "as is?" But if our idea is to produce a woven fabric, it is the texture of the *fabric* that is important — not the texture of the unwoven material. As illustrations of the point he wishes to make Mr. Henning-Rees shows two textiles that might be products of Mrs. Albers' "free combining." Perhaps they are. For my part I should take more pleasure in beholding the skein of silk shown to the left of Illustration No. 3 — and the nice hand tangled in it — than in feasting my eyes on the "textile" to the right, which looks as though it would pull apart of its own weight if hung against the wall for an hour. The piece shown in Illustration No. 4 seems to me even less attractive, and even more impractical. This, I think, I could hardly bear to have about at all.

There is nothing very original in the idea of weaving a firm backing in inferior material to support an overlay of handsome material on the surface. But I confess I prefer an honest fabric that is handsome on both sides and that is solid enough to do its bit of work in the world.

It is perhaps hardly necessary to refer to Henning-Rees' suggestion for using such things as "Leaves and woodpecker scalps" for the decoration of our fabrics. Savages are driven to such devices through having very limited materials to use. We need not resort to such tricks, as we have handsome materials in great variety, as Henning-Rees himself points out. For us such eccentric interpolations would be nothing but silly "pose."

Where I differ most radically with Mr. Henning-Rees, however, is in the matter of pattern. I judge by the context that Mr. Henning-Rees (or Mrs. or Miss) means by "pattern" a decorative figure or design. Of course any orderly system of interlacing warp and weft is, properly speaking, a "pattern;" but for the purposes of the present discussion let us use the word in Mr. Henning-Rees' definition. He says: "As soon as the important thing of a fabric surface is the line, circle or square which a pattern threading weaves the material into, the eye can see nothing else. So the simpler a texture is presented to the eye" — I suppose he means "the more simply" — "the easier it will be to see its beauty." Now this, of course, is not true at all. Many forms of pattern weaving are designed chiefly to bring out and display the texture values of the fabric; damask, for instance, and such pattern weaves as "Ms and Os", the Bronson weave as used for linens, and so on. Also unless the colors are striking, and the figure used very emphatic, the pattern is not so overpowering that "the eye sees nothing else." In a well designed piece of pattern weaving color, figure and texture combine to produce the handsome effect.

Pattern seems to me one of the major pleasures in life. It is all about us and we cannot escape from it while we live in the world, even if we should wish to. The sun draws patterns of shadow upon the earth; trees spread a pattern of leaves between us and the sky; flowers make repeating patterns of colored petals; even minerals if left to themselves form intricate patterns of crystal. Pattern is a part of the geometry of the universe, and we can no more escape from it than from the air we breathe or from the pull of gravitation that holds our feet against the surface of the planet. We might, to be sure, hang our walls in "texture," spread it upon our floors, drape our windows in it, dress our couches and chairs and tables — and ourselves — in unmitigated "texture;" but how dismal the effect would be!

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DOUBLE WEAVING ON EIGHT HARNESSSES

By CORNELIA STONE

Some time ago there came into my possession an old book on weaving, the title page of which reads as follows:

Instructions for Weaving,
in all of its
Various Branches.
by Abslam Hecht
price \$1.
Baltimore

Printed by James Young,
Corner of Baltimore and Holliday Streets
1849

Among the interesting forms of weaving described is this one for Double Weaving on eight harnesses. The page holding the directions is headed "Draft for Double Coverlets and Carpets." I first threaded a trial strip in a two block threading just to gain some idea of the texture. That bit working all right, I then threaded a larger piece in a four block pattern only to find that two of the blocks were given a wrong tie-up, and instead of a closely interwoven piece of goods I had one with long floats whenever these two blocks occurred. Then followed the fun of correcting the tie-up.

The Complete tie-up requires 16 treadles, but I find on my loom that it is so heavy that it is impossible for me to raise the harnesses, so I tie each harness separately and then the two combinations that prove the hardest to hold down I tie to other treadles, using in all ten treadles. The treadling becomes a bit of an acrobatic feat as first five treadles and then four treadles must be held down. Unfortunately this is rather conducive of mistakes, but with care they can be overcome.

On the accompanying page of drafts I give both the complete tie-up and the one I finally used for the four block patterns. The complete tie-up can be used in a two block pattern.

In *THE WEAVER*, Volume V, Number 2, April-May, 1940, page 9, there is a picture of a drapery material in this weave. The draperies hang in a dark hall where clear cut colors are necessary in order to avoid a characterless appearance. The threading used is the John Landes pattern No. 63 doubled throughout. The linen thread used was Knox 25/2 weaving twist. Using 40 threads to the inch, I threaded the front four harnesses with natural mercerized linen and the back four with red mercerized linen. One repeat of the pattern required 268 threads, and the full width was 6 repeats and the first 162 threads, or 1770 threads for material finishing (after washing) 40 inches wide. I find this material hangs in graceful folds making it very satisfactory for draperies.

I have never found in my hunt for old pieces of hand weaving a single bit of weaving of this kind. The nearest approach to it in texture that I can suggest is old Ingrain carpets.

Drafts No. 2 and No. 3 are just as given in this old book. If you use No. 2 be sure to check it, as I have not used it.

I am not sure that it is free from accidentals that should be eliminated. I have included them as they are in the book thinking you might like to see just how Abslam Hecht wrote his drafts.

The last draft is a two block one I have on one of my looms now experimenting with a warp of linen and wool that I hope will be heavy enough to lie flat on the floor. I am trying materials that were on hand to get more of an idea of just what yarns I think will be best for rug making as well as textiles for other uses.

When you select patterns to use in this type of weaving, choose those with large blocks, as blocks having fewer than six or eight threads are completely overshadowed by the interwoven threads surrounding them. Also in using a two block pattern write your draft so that the blocks will be on harnesses 1 and 2, for block one and on 3 and 4 for block two. For the tie-up of such a two block pattern use 1 and 3 of the complete tie-up.

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Of course it does take a good deal of technical training plus some natural ability, to design pleasing patterns and to use them to best advantage. A monotony of repeating pattern, like the carpet in that nightmare hall, may be extremely distressing, and a clumsy figure may be anything but decorative. Not all people are gifted to make their own designs. And here we come back to Mrs. Albers' "approved repetitions." A musician may not be able to compose so much as a cowboy lament, and still be able to make the "approved repetition" of a Chopin sonata to the delight of all listeners. And to say that such music is not 'Art' would be foolish. I doubt if either Mrs. Albers or Mr. Henning-Rees would care to go so far. In exactly the same way a skillful weaver can make an "approved" textile "repetition" with highly satisfactory results. Such renderings need not be slavish copies, they may be highly individualized interpretations, for weaving like music is endlessly variable.

Mr. Henning-Rees concludes with this sage dictum: "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." I confess I do not know exactly what he means by this. He does not say what kind of pattern weaving is the product of what time or why it should be particularly interesting historically. Of course pattern weaving is the product of all human times, our own included, and though any product of human endeavor has its historic interest, the chief interest in pattern weaving for most of us is here and now, for the decoration of our own textiles. It seems to me unlikely that the use of "raw silks with their dull-sheen surface, or looped or bumpy rayons, or loosely spun or slubby linens" will for most people make sleazy tabby weaving the peak of beauty in the textile art.

I wonder just how much Mr. Henning-Rees knows about pattern weaving?