

TECHNICAL PERFECTION

This is another controversial subject. What is more it is a subject which can be looked at from so many angles, that no particular approach to it will satisfy everybody.

Mary Atwater in her "Shuttle-Craft" warns the reader, that although small technical imperfections give to the handwoven fabrics their peculiar charm, one should not try to make mistakes on purpose, there will be enough of them in any case.

Since she wrote this however, the general tendency among weavers is to get as near to the technical perfection as possible. And some of them are making astonishing progress. We are all familiar with pieces of handweaving looking as if they were made on a power-loom, which seems to be a doubtful distinction particularly if the pattern and colour scheme are not too original. If we concentrate too much in this direction, hand-weaving may become a pointless sport, like building ship models in bottles, or copying old masters just for the fun of it. Perhaps this example with old masters is not so far-fetched as it sounds. In the curriculum of art schools copying is one of the subjects, and is considered very beneficial in training, since it is the best test of the technical skill of the student. Which does not mean that the student will go through life imitating old masters. The analogy is here: we should have enough weaving skill to be able to imitate the work of a power loom, but we should never take advantage of this ability. Or hardly ever.

The "neatness" of a piece of weaving depends on: accuracy in threading and treadling, edges, beating, and on the absence or presence of knots in the fabric. Many exhibitions and competitions for handweavers require that there be no mistakes of any kind in threading and treadling, absolutely straight edges, mathematically even beating, and no knots of any description. One can agree that mistakes in the pattern or in the weave are objectionable unless fairly uniformly distributed (but then are they "mistakes"?). But a certain irregularity of beating decidedly improves the appearance of fabrics, particularly in case of tabby and simple twills. Too straight edges are not an asset. A slightly wavy line (without loops and notches) is more like what one expects to find in a handwoven piece. Knots must be avoided at all costs in tweeds for the simple reason that sooner or later they will produce holes, but they are quite harmless for instance in table linen, and if properly trimmed they will show only as lighter or darker specks. We would not go so far however as to say that they enhance the beauty of the fabric.

When we examine samples of real native weaving, whether European peasants', or American Indians', we won't find them particularly "neat". It is not that these weavers have not got the necessary skill - they just did not bother. The whole idea of "neatness" belongs to the industrial weaving, and originated with hand-weavers engaged in mass-production for exacting masters, and still more exacting, though not necessarily discerning, customers. Since the very idea of mass-production is diametrically opposed to our own aims, there is hardly any reason why we should accept the exigencies and standards of industrial weaving.