
MASTER WEAVER

Z - H A N D I C R A F T S • F U L F O R D • Q U E B E C • C A N A D A

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PROBLEMS

We have already said nearly all we had to say about so called "texture weaving" (MW,4). But this particular problem is only a part of a larger one: it is our attitude to the weaving in general.

Thousands of years ago - we probably will never learn exactly when - somebody somehow got the idea of opening a "shed" of a primitive frame loom, instead of inserting the weft by a laborious process of picking up the ends of warp. We can imagine with what joy this early inventor started putting into his shed all kinds of most inappropriate objects: twigs, rushes, grass, leaves, perhaps leather thongs, split wood, bark, seaweeds, and what not. Some of these materials might have been roughly spun, most - probably not.

It took millenia to eliminate worthless "textiles", so that only few remained: silk, flax, cotton, wool and their cousins, like hemp, ramie etc in the flax group, and the yarns spun from the hair of different animals in the wool group.

If nothing else survived it is not because weavers of those remote epochs were prejudiced, or superstitious, but because they had enough time, measured in centuries, to find out that everything else turned out to be unsatisfactory from one point of view or another. Some materials did not stand the tension, or the torsion, or the friction, other - the heat, or sunshine, or moisture, or cold. Some desintegrated in time without any particular reason, some became stiff or brittle, or mouldy, or acquired unpleasant colouring.

Then followed centuries of most satisfactory achievements in hand weaving. No new weaving materials were introduced until the quite recent invention of artificial fibers. Then we have a comparatively short period of mechanical weaving, which did not go very far from the primitive methods, with the only exception of speed, but which for nearly a century did not use anything but the most conservative yarns.

And now after thousands of years we start the whole story all over again. We rebel against the wisdom accumulated by hundreds of generations of craftsmen, and do exactly the same what the first weavers did long before the time of Swiss Lake dwellers. We try to force into the shed anything at all, as long as it will stay there.

We discussed already the "whys" of this movement, and this is not the point we are trying to make. We are entitled to experiment, even if there is not much chance that the experiments will bring us anything but a very temporary sense of achievement. We pay for it, and if we like it, who can stop us? Even if the dissenters call it our second childhood, some of us may enjoy it. The peril is not here.

It is when the experiments stop half way, or not even half way, and then on this meagre experience we base production - that the things become really bad. As if a child who learns cooking by the hit and miss method insisted ^{on} his half-baked products of pure chance being commercialised.

Unfortunately this is exactly what happens in "texture" hand weaving, and not only in texture. In traditional weaving we already have seen the same trend only too often. The famous weavers who never have threaded their looms to anything but honeysuckle are proverbial, but how many stick to one weave and pattern, not even their own, produce it by hundreds of yards, and sell?

It seems that many weavers go only so far in their development, then become rigid, and instead of learning more or giving up the whole thing, they go on producing and selling. This rigidity seems to be much worse a symptom, than an indiscriminate orgy of mixing together all possible textiles, colours, and weaves.

It is rather obvious why one would expect the "texture" weavers to be less rigid than the others. By the very definition they are the rebels against the tradition, and they should go on experimenting until they hit on something really better, really valuable. So it is rather disappointing, when one sees them producing the same unfortunate combinations of novelty yarns in endless warps, in atrocious colours, to the not too sincere delight of not too discriminating customers. The very brilliant exceptions from this rule make the general level look still worse.

A similar or at least analogous situation exists in dyeing. We are all only too familiar with the alleged superiority of vegetable dyes over all other, particularly synthetic ones, which many craftsmen persist in calling "anilin dyes". No such superiority exists of course - it is pure superstition which originated a century ago, and as all superstitions had some meaning at the time when it started. The first synthetic dyes (some of them being derivatives of anilin) were really poor substitutes for the commercial vegetable ones. But since then every vegetable dye (and not only vegetable) has been duplicated by the synthetic processes. And it is not the colour which is duplicated - it is the substance itself, which is absolutely identical with the original dye. Thus the synthetic dyes have all properties, not only colour, exactly the same as the vegetable ones, and besides there are thousands of artificial dyes never created by nature.

It is entirely different question, whether the good synthetic dyes (not the drugstore variety) are easy to get particularly in small quantities. No, they are not, and we can blame for this fact the chemical industry, but never the dyes themselves.

Thus, since we cannot get good and easy-to-apply dyes from the industry, we condemn the whole chemistry and return to the nature. We boil tons of weeds (it takes about a pound of natural dyeing substance for a pound of yarn, when a pound of artificial dye can last a craftsman for generations), strip whole trees of bark, dig for rare roots on the new moon, collect patiently blossoms, fruit and what not, and get in result the famous "subdued", "pastel", "inimitable" shades - hardly ever a definite colour.

Does not the whole approach remind us of the "texture" weaving. Again we repeat what has been done thousands of years ago. We gloat

over dyes which have been rejected as useless by the Pharaohs. And how do we know that what we "discover" has any real value? That the dye did not fade since last Xmas - well, it still may do so next spring. But then most vegetable dyes with few commercial exceptions do fade. The argument that the Egyptian textiles conserved a remarkable freshness of colour is not such a good one - these textiles have been preserved in ideal conditions: complete darkness and complete absence of humidity.

What we really like about old dyes is precisely the fact that they were far from being perfect. First the dyeing was not even, producing the well known effect of "ripples". Then they faded and became "subdued", but they were not so in the first place. Finally the fading was not even: it was more pronounced on the surface than in the depth of the fabric.

The two first effects are easily duplicated, and we can buy yarns both unevenly dyed and "faded". The third can be duplicated by artificial means too, but as far as we know, not on a commercial scale.

And here again we stop half-way in our experiments with dyes, without even reaching the level of old commercial vegetable dyeing.

One more example of "rigidity" is the equipment we are using. Although handlooms of all possible types have been developed as early as the 18-th century, and all we have to do is to select the proper model, we insist on going through the whole history of the weaving loom all over again. We make improvements and inventions which would look childish to a medieval weaver. We build by the thousand looms which are absolutely useless, and what is the limit - we kind of like them.

Not that there is no room for certain changes in construction of looms such as used in commercial handweaving two centuries ago. Due to the different requirements there is. But strangely enough we do very little in this direction. Instead we rake our brains in order to replace wood with metal pipes for the sake of originality, to change the old and efficient shedding motion into a cross between Jacquard and a Swiss music box so as to make weaving next to impossible, to make looms very low - as if the space above the loom could be used for anything except hanging a mobile, to make the harness either so heavy that it will resist anybody but the strongest weaver, or so light that it won't open any shed.

The same applies to the warping equipment and other accessories.

We can understand that worthless equipment may find its way to the market particularly when it is kind of a surplus, which simply has to be sold, but why on earth so called discriminating weavers buy all this rubbish, and why do they think or pretend to think that they are satisfied with it?

The answer to all these questions is simple if a little discouraging: we do not know enough about our trade. We do not know enough about textiles - and hence our failure in texture weaving, we do not know anything about chemistry and this explains our pathetic attempts at dyeing, we do not know enough about colour and design and produce atrocities by the ton, we know too little about the theory of weaving and stick unnecessarily to a few selected at random "easy" weaves, finally we know next to nothing about the mechanics of weaving and we get stuck with equipment which does not meet any requirements whatsoever.

We do not imply that a hobbyist should spend years on studying textiles, chemistry, mechanics, mathematics and art - but he should have some knowledge of all these, and a profound knowledge of his own line: chemistry if he experiments with dyes, artistic background - if he designs fabrics, mechanics - if he makes looms. On the other hand there should be in every group of weavers somebody who can help the members with problems not directly connected with their specialty. For instance a tapestry weaver, probably an artist by education or at least temperament, does not need to know all about looms but he should be in position to consult somebody who is an expert. There is simply no short cut here. To become real craftsmen we must learn more about weaving, and since we cannot learn all, we must rely on experts. An individual cannot always reach an expert when he is in trouble, but a weavers' guild can make it easier for him. First by securing the help and cooperation of local talents amateur, or professional, then by inviting experts from other weaving centers.

What an average weaver should learn about weaving in general?

First he should master the principles of working of at least one type of hand loom - the type of course which he is likely to use in the future. He should know it thoroughly, its faults as well as its merits, and what is more, he should gradually correct all the faults.

Next come the yarns. Their composition, count, twist, chemical and physical properties, and applications.

Only then the theory of weaving. It does not need to go beyond the scope of interest and the technical possibilities of the weaver, but within these limits it should be mastered to a high degree. It is not enough to read a draft, make a draw-down or even to find different variations of treadling. A creative craftsman must be able to make his own drafts, transcribe patterns from one technique into another, even produce variations of weaves, should such a necessity arise. Not that there is the slightest possibility of discovering a new weave, but we cannot rely on collections of recipes, when we are faced with a problem of designing a fabric with definite physical properties.

Every weaver should have some kind of artistic background, inborn or acquired. Inborn for instance by being brought up in some particular tradition of folk art. Acquired by studying painting (not necessarily to the point of becoming an artist painter), or the history of decorative textiles, or decorative art in general.

Those are the minimum requirements. They should be followed by a deep study of the one particular line of weaving in which we should like to specialise. The narrower this specialty the more chance we have to become outstanding weavers, the more satisfaction we shall have from our work, and the less risk of becoming "rigid" before reaching a high degree of creativity.

Compare: "Why do we weave?" (MW 1), "Master Weavers" (MW 3), "What about texture?" (MW 4), "Craft or Business" (MW 10).
