
MASTER WEAVER

Z - HANDICRAFTS - FULFORD - QUEBEC - CANADA

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STANDARDS.

The difference between a democracy, and a totalitarian state is, that in the former there is as little standardisation as possible, and in the latter - as much as possible and even more.

However from times immemorial democracies accepted a certain amount of standards, without which the life would be a nightmare. Thus we all accept standards in measuring, standards in speaking and writing, standards in social behaviour, and in particular: standards in education. We find it as natural to say: "he is a high-school graduate", as: "this is a two-hundred mile drive", or: "a two-pound steak". We do not feel that our personal freedom is endangered when the filling station attendant takes 3 dollars for 10 gallons of gas. We do not argue about the definition of "high school", "mile", "pound", "dollar", and "gallon" - although they are all "standards".

We take also for granted that a driver, a teacher, a civil servant, a soldier, must pass certain standardised tests to be qualified. Otherwise they might become a public danger.

This principle however does not seem to work in crafts. Granted that the very idea of a craft is opposed to the modern trends in our so called civilisation. Granted that we do it for pleasure, or perhaps more than for pleasure - for a deep psychological need of fulfillment. But still, there is often a need to discern between a good craftsman and a beginner, between a genius and a failure.

This need arises, unfortunately, whenever money comes into the picture. This is probably because money is most highly standardised. It has always a very definite value, never an approximate one. We do not mind for instance when we are told: "you have about 3000 miles to drive to reach the West Coast", but we would feel insulted if our bank manager informed us that our overdraft is "about" 3000 dollars. Thus we like to know that what we buy for money, has also a definite value.

Therefore as long as one is pursuing a hobby for his own satisfaction, does not sell, and does not teach others, the question of standards does not arise, unless the craftsman in question wants to get some sort of recognition for his work. But once we start selling our abilities, whether as a teacher, a judge of an exhibit, or as a producer of handicrafts to be sold - we must have some sort of standards.

If a weaver takes money from another weaver to teach him, then at least it must be understood that the teacher knows more about weaving than the student. This distinction is not too difficult with complete beginners who have never seen a shuttle, provided that the teacher knows how to teach, and not only how to weave. But it is not so simple with more advanced weavers. Let us suppose that I should like to learn a not too common weaving technique such as damask on a double harness. I know about a few weavers here and many more overseas who do this kind of weaving. In any case I'll have to travel and spend some money on this project. But where to go? Which of them is a good craftsman and at the same time a good teacher? I might try and try again, and still be disappointed. In old good times my guild would direct me to a master weaver who specialises in this particular line. Why not now? Why cannot we have a National Guild or even regional Guilds which would test and qualify teachers?

Thus in teaching we could do with some standards concerning both: the craftsmanship and the teaching abilities of those at least who advertise and take money for the tuition.

But this is not all. There is another problem which concerns all weavers who sell their weaving. How many good craftsmen complain about the lack of a market, when at the same time the tourists spend millions every year on worthless "souvenirs". You may say that this is only the result of lack of good taste, and that nothing short of compulsory education of the tourist can change the situation. But is it only the tourist to be blamed? I doubt it. Very often a discriminating traveller wants to bring back from a trip something unique and characteristic for the visited district. And what happens? He buys Mexican pottery at Woolworth, because there is nothing else. Or in higher class - Indian silverware. This silver is good, no doubt about it. Perhaps it is even made by the Indians. But unfortunately it can be bought everywhere although it belongs to the South West only. Leatherware must be made all in one place in huge quantities (because it is so cheap) but it is stamped with the name of any place at all, and the same kind is sold from coast to coast and from the Equator to the North Pole. The style, the workmanship do not count any more - it is the low price which matters.

There is general trend to abuse the tourist, and give him as little as possible for the little he wants to spend. But he wants to spend only little, because he knows that he is cheated anyhow.

And here at least in our own domain we can do something. For that matter we can do two things: insist on selling only high-quality hand-woven and hand-finished articles; and use only design which would be in some way characteristic for the place where it is offered for sale. This does not mean that we should use only traditional patterns and limit ourselves to the drafts which were popular in a given district some two hundred years ago. We may and even must modernise, adapt, convert and transcribe, take into consideration later influences and contemporary trends - but always trying to preserve and stress the local colour.

Obviously such articles will be much more expensive than the mass produced "souvenirs". And here the Weavers' Guilds can help a lot in selling them by issuing certificates of approval in form of

tags attached to each article. These tags should be uniform in design, so that they will become as familiar to the tourist as the sign "AAA" on a motel, and as effectif also.

But to deserve such a seal of approval the article must conform with certain standards. These standards would apply not only to the craftsmanship, but also to the design, its appropriateness in the place of selling, the yarns used, and finally - the price.

In connection with the last point a distinction must be made between hand-woven goods produced: 1-st, as "exclusive"; 2-nd, as "hand-woven" but not exclusive; 3-rd, "hand-loomed" i.e. woven on fly-shuttle looms; and 4-th, "hand-made" on small automatic looms operated by hand or foot, where the quality of the fabric requires slow rate of production. The seal of approval should specify to which of these four categories the article belongs, and the price must be established accordingly.

By "exclusive" goods we understand hand-woven fabrics made for one customer only. One coat length, one set of place-mats, one pair of guest towels, one apron, one skirt, and so on. This is the highest classification, and highest prices should be charged.

The "hand-woven" but not exclusive weaving means that on the same warp more than one set, length, or article are produced, without changing the colours or design. Such articles are produced faster, and therefore are cheaper. In certain cases as for instance place-mats and napkins, they are easier to sell, because one order can be subdivided into large or small sets.

"Hand-loomed" articles are a different problem. If a honest craftsman wants to weave a fabric 72 inches wide he has hardly any choice but to use fly-shuttle. But if he uses his knowledge of fly-shuttle weaving to make 6 parallel napkins, or towels, then he is a mass-producer. It is up to the Guild to condemn articles made on fly-shuttle looms, and which could be made as well on a hand-shuttle loom.

"Hand-made" fabrics woven on automatic looms in very large quantities belong all to the same class: high quality tweeds made of such a yarn which would not stand the speed of a power loom. They work on the principle that the labour (unskilled) being so much, and the yarn so much, it is cheaper to produce hand-woven materials, than to force a power loom to work at a low speed.

Then this is our problem: Distinguish between good and poor teachers of handweaving. Distinguish between good and bad articles offered for sale. Protect good teachers and good craftsmen.

We shall publish two more articles on this subject, where we shall discuss the ways and means.
