
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 *

September, 1955

No. 23

TRADITIONAL AND MODERN DESIGNING.

After all the negative advice given in the last Master Weaver it is about time to say something positive. We cannot conclude that only born geniuses, or those with special art studies have right to weave. But every weaver should make an utmost effort to learn as much about designing as possible in the existing circumstances. We have already discussed the best way; now we shall consider the second best, which should be accessible to every craftsman.

1-st. Discover or select our cultural background.

We take it for granted of course, that the craftsman in question does not come straight from one of those "isolated communities" we have described in the former article. But everybody has some kind of a background which carries memories of crafts and folklore. Even if this background is completely forgotten there are unconscious ties which make it more familiar to us than the arts and crafts of any other country. It may be Pennsylvania Dutch, or Indian of New Mexico, Castillian of California, or Acadian of New Brunswick, Colonial of New England or Creol of the deep South. And then there are European traditions - Scandinavian, Slavic, Balkan, Caucasian, Italian or Spanish.

Even if none of these can be recognised as "our own", we can always find one particular ethnical group, one particular primitive civilisation more appealing than any other.

2-nd. Get acquainted with it.

Once the "background" is found or selected, let us concentrate on it. Learn all there is to learn about this country or period. Start with the landscape, its line and colour in all seasons of the year. Then the original primitive architecture. The relationship between the shape of the buildings and the climat. For instance the pitch of thatched roofs is proportional to the amount of rainfall. More rain means steeper roofs. Wind is another factor which influences the builder. Then the heat and the cold. Thus the "design" of a house is a compromise between many requirements: the materials available, the weather, and the way of life of the inhabitants. Through the centuries the house develops into a form not only logical but beautiful, fitting perfectly into the landscape.

Next come the people. Their history, religion, trades, cooking, drinking, music and dancing. Furniture they used and dresses they wore. Interior decorating. Tools used in work. And learning about their life always ask the question: "why?". As in the case of the pitch of roofs, there is an explanation, a logical answer.

For instance in a certain part of Carpathian Mountains the highlanders make coverlets of pure wool about one inch thick. The design is not unlike Navaho. Why? Because the winters are severe, and the houses built of logs therefore poorly insulated. The only fuel is soft wood, which does not burn long. It gets cold towards the morning. The wool is cheap because it is produced locally. Thus it is easier to weave warm coverlets that to get up during the night and keep the stove running.

To make a very thick coverlet they use very heavy weft hardly spun at all. Thus the weaving is fast, but cannot be done with an ordinary shuttle because of the thickness of the yarn. Then why not use the tapestry technique? And the simplest and most logical designs in this technique are similar to Navaho patterns. The wool is spun "in grease" and it repells water - an advantage when the roof is made of fluted shingles, which are not always watertight, particularly when a heavy downpour comes after a long drought. To make the coverlets stronger they are fulled.

In the same district we find Dutch type stoves, covered entirely with tiles. Each tile is different, each has a picture, and these pictures often form a sequence like comic strips. Why? Dutch stoves because they remain hot longer than any other type. Then the tiles are made locally - therefore they are cheap. They are made by hand and nothing would be gained if all the tiles were identical. Thus every tile is different.

Women do not wear skirts - just aprons. Rather large aprons overlapping one another, so that the final effect is of a skirt. Why? Because all travel in these mountains is done on horseback. And it is easier to mount a horse particularly in cold weather wearing a set of aprons than in a skirt. These aprons are made of fine wool and their number may be adjusted according to the weather. The colours are made with local dyes, and cannot offend the eye, since local dyes are part of the landscape.

Looking closer we discover certain incongruities. For instance the presence of metallic threads in weaving. From purely practical point of view they have no justification. But their source is easy to find. From time immemorial through the mountain passes lead trails frequented by Oriental merchants. The highlanders were too poor to create a market of any importance. But in passing through the country the merchants left, perhaps as a gift for hospitality, some of the Oriental glamour. Fortunately the community was too poor to abuse this "novelty yarn". It just gave a sparkle to the striped woolen fabrics. Instead of corrupting the local style it became integrated.

But the merchants went farther north and west and sold expensive Oriental rugs to the landed gentry. These rugs inspired native weavers. Not that they were copied - but certain motifs

appealed somehow to the peasant craftsmen, and were "translated" into local style. Thus in old "kilims" (flat tapestry rugs) we find a tree - tree of life from India beside a Persian palmetta, and an undoubtedly Chinese "cloud", which in its long travel through many countries lost all resemblance to its meteorological ancestor. The process was so slow and the "translation" so thorough, that this foreign influence did hardly any damage - if anything, it enriched the traditional design, which otherwise might become rigidly geometrical as happened in some parts of Northern Europe.

We gave this lengthy example to explain what we understand by the study of a cultural background. All aspects of life must be taken into consideration if we want to feel about the work of the native weaver the same way as he felt.

3. Learn the traditional designing.

We can now start weaving, remembering that we must stick to certain yarns, colours, and techniques peculiar to the place and epoch we have selected. At first let us copy the most typical traditional articles. This will be a test of our technical abilities. Then we may create new designs still in keeping with the tradition. But let us be very careful and conservative. For instance if we decided that it is the Colonial period where we start, we shall make our own patterns in overshot, but such patterns which would not be laughed at by an 18-th century Bostonian.

Obviously we cannot stop here. No matter how good our weaving is judged by the Colonial standards we could hardly find any market to dispose of it, even if by market we understand Xmas gifts.

A more advanced exercise consists on making adaptations for weaving from patterns used in different related crafts. For instance simple elements of traditional patterns used in tapestry can be adapted to such techniques as Locked Wefts (MW 4/7), or Twice Woven rugs (MW 20/3). Cross stitch can be copied on a draw-loom (MW 13/8), or a pattern harness (MW 7/8). The said patterns must belong to the period and place we have selected and cannot be taken from any other source.

A still further step will be to make our own patterns in the above mentioned techniques. Since they give the weaver much more freedom than the usual formal weaves, the difficulties are greater, and pitfalls more numerous. The patterns should be drawn first without any restrictions as if they were made for embroidery, and then adapted to weaving. By "adapting" we mean transcription into a practical weaving draft, which often means simplification. Even this step is only an exercise, and although it may produce highly artistic results, the weaving will be neither modern nor practical.

4. Modernise the traditional design.

Now comes the second stage. We have the "background" but we must integrate it into the modern way of life. How? In the same way as we acquired are background: by learning about the "modern way of life". Here our task should be easier since we already know quite a lot about this subject.

Books about designing will help at this stage. Except books on so called "creative" art (as if art could be not creative), which have a rather special approach to the arts in general, and are of little value for applied arts and crafts.

What are the outstanding features of modern designing in crafts? First: simplicity. Second: freedom from routine. Third: functionality. The design must be simple, not necessarily symmetrical, and the finished product must be practical. This last condition does not mean the same as in colonial times. Then anything "practical" was supposed to be everlasting, which is of secondary importance now. We want it to be easy to use, and not too difficult to make.

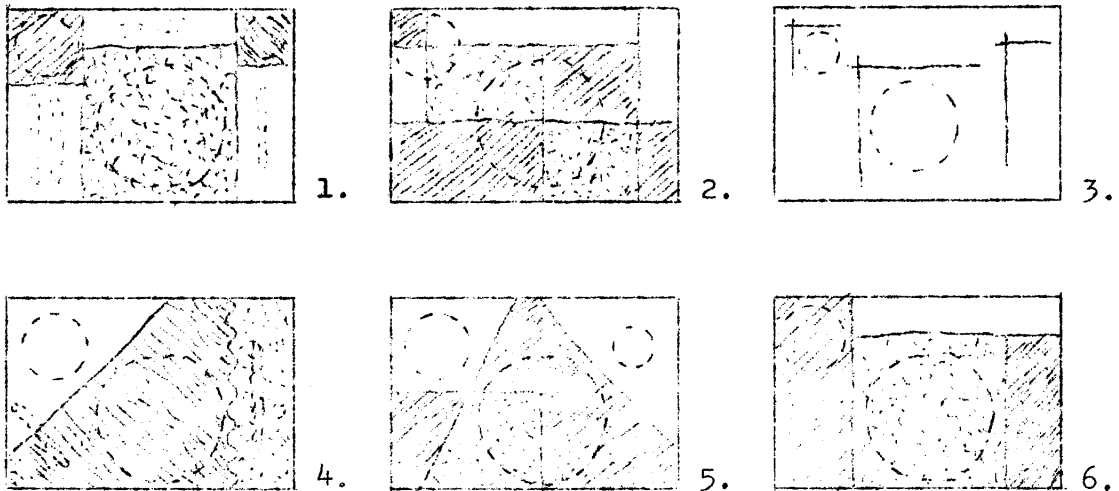
Plain as these new rules are, they are not so simple when applied. Nothing easier than to make a dissymmetrical draft (freedom from routine) in tightly woven summer-and-winter (functionality) and use only one block of pattern in quiet colours (simplicity). Still the thing may look silly, as if one corner were cut from a large colonial piece. It may be serviceable, but still it is not what we wanted. Where then is the catch?

Here the books will help. Particularly the laws of composition. Geniuses may laugh at them, but we better not.

The catch is in functionality. This term does not mean only that the woven piece is easy to wash, but that there is a relationship between the design and the "function" the article is supposed to perform. Let us take as an example a place mat. It may be a beauty in itself, but how will it look when in use? What if the plate covers the most interesting part of it, the tumbler stands just off a dark square in the left corner, and the spoon is pushed off the mat by a diagonal?

Thus we must learn how to produce a compromise between different requirements. We start with the size of the place mat. This is governed by purely practical considerations such as the size and shape of the table. But the pattern if any is decided upon according to the arrangement of china and cutlery. This cannot be changed at our will - it must be practical, and it already forms a pattern. Unless we leave the surface of the mat completely uniform, our weaving pattern must harmonise with the already existing one. For instance: a large square for the plate, rectangles for forks etc., a small square or two for glasses. This is very obvious solution, even too obvious (fig.1). Or just the contrary: dividing lines between geometrical figures indicate the centers for eating implements (fig.2). Or the lines are tangent to the plates (fig.3). There is a number of possibilities here (figs. 4 to 6), but whichever we choose, the same principle of relationship should be used throughout. Again this is a rule, which may be disregarded by a very experienced designer.

In selecting the weave, yarn, and colours for the mat we shall be enormously helped by our "background". Its limitations will keep us sober, and will reduce the problem to a reasonable number of possibilities.



Our approach to colour should be the same as in case of the pattern. We stick at first to the traditional scheme, or even to a still more limited selection. The best practice in colour composition are stripes. Nearly every country and every period has its striped fabrics, and it is most interesting to watch how their composition harmonises with other patterns and forms. We shall here find plenty of material for further experiments. In the period of transition from the traditional to the modern weaving we shall limit our choice of colours still more.

What we do now depends on how much we have learned so far. But we should always remember that it is safer to exaggerate in moderation, that to abuse the colours.

Yarns to be used are the easiest problem. We should specialise in one or two - the ones characteristic of our background. But with this one or two we should get acquainted thoroughly, starting with the heaviest down to the finest ever made. We must experiment with different twists, and different numbers of plies. We must learn how to combine different counts of yarn in the same woven piece.

Weaves are those which are or were used in the traditional weaving. This does not put us at a disadvantage in any way. Weaves are pliable and there is not a single one which could not be used in modern weaving.

And here we must stop our article. If one knows weaving, knows his yarns, and is familiar both with his background and with the modern life - will know also what to do next.

To meet our critics half way, we must reiterate that the advice given here is not for the weavers who successfully studied designing, or to whom it all comes just naturally, or who in one way or another take all the first prizes in exhibitions, but for those who although less fortunate, still do not want to copy, are dissatisfied with the artistic side of their weaving, and do not give up easily.
