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# MASTER WEAVER

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Z - HANDICRAFTS - FULFORD - QUEBEC - CANADA

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## ART OR CRAFT ?

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If we believe the statistics, there are some 500,000 handweavers on the continent of the North America. Most of them are craftsmen. It means that they weave for pleasure or for a small profit. They are not artists and they do not pretend to be.

Artists may be the salt of the earth, but they are not numerous. They cannot be or they would be worth a dime a dozen.

Nevertheless certain publications, lecturers, and even organisations try to impress all weavers that what they must do, whether they like it or not, is to be "creative", "modern", "contemporary", "inspired", "functional", "dynamic", and what not.

All this is cheap advertising and nothing else. Nobody can become an artist by trying hard, or by studying, or by using fancy yarns or fancy looms, or fancy teachers. Even psychoanalysis does not turn an ordinary human being into an artist, rather the opposite. Artists find the art as the only way of expressing themselves and if we meddle with this natural process we are only likely to stop it.

A craftsman on the other hand is the heir of the science of handweaving accumulated by the centuries. Industrial weaving grew up out of him, and the artistic weaving (if such a thing exists) takes advantage (and seldom full advantage) of his experience.

Thus there is not the slightest reason for a honest craftsman to feel inferior, because he is making only good linen towels with a fairly decent design. His brother artist-weaver will make similar towels in most inappropriate yarn and technique, ask ten times their value, and be either successful by sheer imposition, or frustrated by critical environment.

There is not the slightest reason why towels, place-mats or tapestry should have big and untidy holes in them; why should they be made of strange and ugly materials; why in short should they be useless.

Let us not forget one very significant fact: that a craftsman can teach an artist, but an artist is absolutely unable to teach a craftsman. He can talk, that's all. Ask him: What? And he will deliver a lecture. Ask him: How? And he will find a pressing appointment.

It is another story that a craftsman should know the principles of designing, and we have spent quite a lot of time discussing problems related to this subject. But no amount of knowledge of designing can make an artist.

In our opinion those who encourage all weavers to be artists are doing a lot of harm to our movement, because they lead their followers into hopeless impasses, force them to struggle against tremendous odds, and finally leave them exhausted and disgusted with the very idea of weaving.

We can grant that the same happens in other crafts, particularly in pottery, but this fact does make the problem any easier.

We should remember that crafts are and always were concerned first of all with techniques, with "how" to make things. This makes crafts accessible to everybody, this makes them important as a social phenomenon. If we increase the artistic level of handweaving to a point where only few chosen can follow, we are obviously closing the gates to those who need the craft most. An artist will always find some medium for his creativeness, but a craftsman must be allowed to find his own level, his own direction, and his own medium to be happy with whatever he is doing.

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It is perhaps a mistake to look to other countries for inspiration, but since many weavers consider anything Scandinavian to be synonymous with perfection, then how this conflict between art and craft was solved over there? - They solved it in a very natural way without wasting time on useless experiments. Their designing has been always based on folklore art; therefore it developed very slowly without going to any extremes, and now is as modern as it can be, it is functional without being extravagant, showy, cheap.

What we did was to stick as long as possible to the original folklore (colonial weaving) without changing it at all, and then instead of adapting and developing this style which has already become a part of our unconscious cultural background, we switched suddenly to the stone-age-period of weaving. This sort of experiments may produce extremely interesting results, but it is very dangerous for the craftsman, who loses all sense of security, and even all sense of proportion. This of course makes him unhappy, uncertain of himself, lost in too many possibilities.

And at this stage, instead of correcting our mistake, we start pretending that this is "Art", regardless of what we are really doing. But haphazard experimenting is not art, and if it were then what happens to the Craft? Is the craft forbidden now?

It seems that this is the case, because we hear such expressions as: "His weaving is crafty", meaning that the weaver has good technique but only conventional design. Why not use another expression: "arty"? It could be applied with justice much more often than "crafty". It would mean that the weaving is poor by all standards, but it is unconventional.

We are afraid that if too many weavers will take seriously this "arty" trend in handweaving, the whole movement will go through another crisis similar to the one produced by the industrial revolution. Already now many handweavers after trying this apparently easy and modern trend give up in despair, and our numbers are dwindling.

But there will be always honest craftsmen who will see this crisis through. There will be always honest artists as well, but it is not the artist who preserves the knowledge and technique of a craft. Artistic standards and requirements change from decade to decade, when the craft develops in terms of centuries. Art gives satisfaction to the selected few, when craft is a really democratic movement which satisfies the needs of millions.

But of course the worst is the "arty" weaving which is neither art or craft, but an escape for those who are not gifted enough to be artists, and too lazy to become craftsmen.

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The role of a craftsman in weaving is becoming more important than ever. Industrial weaving does not preserve the tradition of handweaving, because their methods are getting more and more involved, mechanised, and specialised. An industrial weaver or rather operator has hardly any idea about the mechanics and possibilities of a hand-loom. We know experts in textiles who take up handweaving as a hobby! Thus the craftsman has the whole responsibility and perhaps the mission of preserving for the future generations the science of handweaving. There is nobody else, who could do it, and this science may be badly needed yet.

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## FROM THE CLASSICS

"...Mrs. T. Chamberlin, related to me on her 100th birthday this remarkable account of her grandmother:

"My grandmother was a woman of remarkable energy, determination, and skill. One time when my father received a summons to appear in Court in Montreal, and there were only three days before he must start, and he had no suitable pants in which to appear, she went to the pasture and caught and sheared a white sheep, then caught and sheared a black sheep. She carded this wool into rolls, spun it into yarn, quilled the necessary quantity of one colour for the woof, then, taking the other colour for the warp and placing it properly in the loom, she wove some cloth into small black and white checks. When she judged that she had a sufficient quantity of cloth she took it from the loom, cut out and made the required pants for my father, working without sleep for three days and two nights that he might go suitably clothed to the city."

History of Brome County - Rev. E. M. Taylor.

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