

HANDWEAVING NEWS

Handweaving as a Business.

A very common question often asked by the person contemplating the buying of a loom and the taking of weaving lessons is, "If I buy a loom will I be able to sell my weaving, or will I be able to make my living at it?" This is a rather difficult question to answer, because its answer depends so much on the character and ability of the person asking it. And also the same business principles apply to weaving as to any other business.

Difference between Amateur and Professional Craftsman Weaver. Of course many people begin to learn to weave with no idea of ever turning this knowledge into even a part time proposition for additional income. The amateur weaves entirely for his own pleasure. He makes what he likes to suit his own needs, spends as much time doing it as he wishes, and should have a good time doing it. His weaving may serve as an outlet for surplus energy, or as a diversion from the daily routine of the home or office, and an opportunity to exercise one's own individuality for creative self expression in the making of things for his own home or for gifts. On the other hand, the professional craftsman weaver must weave to sell, and satisfy popular or specific taste and demand. With him, time means money, hence he must work out and know all of the possible short cuts to make his work easy and profitable. Often the amateur may become the professional, particularly if he is willing to study and work hard to know and understand all of the essentials pertaining to the craft.

Originality One of the most important things for the professional craftsman is originality. He must be able to develop his own ideas and weaving patterns. He must have a thorough knowledge of the loom and all of its possibilities. Craftsman weavers sufficiently skilled could easily lead the way for machine made fabrics through the development of new ideas and ways of using threads. But all too many handweavers have been too busy copying old Colonial coverlet patterns or Scandinavian weaving to develop anything new. These things have their own place and the amateur is often made very happy and has a feeling of real accomplishment through the weaving of this sort of thing. But the professional craftsman should never be satisfied to stop there, he should ever be on the alert to find new ways of working and develop new ideas and new patterns, or new threads for the using of old patterns, to develop an entirely new texture. A few years ago a California craftsman weaver developed on her hand loom a fabric for ^{summer} skiing, which was later put into production and nationally advertised by a sporting firm. It is in this way that a real craftsman can lead and show the way. There are a number of other things which aid one to develop originality. The first is the study of design and color, or an inherent feeling for it. Modern fabrics are emphasizing texture, so the craftsman should study and experiment with different kinds of threads and yarns for unusual combinations. Often times some materials native to a definite locality might be used to develop a definite specialty. At a recent exhibit I saw some most interesting textiles developed from Pima cotton from Arizona. I have since tried to obtain some without any success, though I understand this is native to Arizona. There is also a brown cotton in some sections of Louisiana, but this I am told comes from the cotton being picked after it has first been touched with frost. It cannot be used in commercial production, but is very lovely in both texture and color when spun by hand.

This matter of handspinning also is only justified for the professional craftsman when an entirely different kind of thread is produced either in color or texture from the manufactured product. And the same would hold true also for dyeing. Of course here too the question of cost of production of handspun or handdyed thread would have to be considered when one is weaving for sale.

Development of a Specialty. If one is weaving definitely with the idea of selling, they should work out their own specialty, generally they are more successful selling the kind of weaving they like best to do, but they should know all phases of weaving as well. For instance, let us take handwoven bags as a specialty. First we must learn all we can about the general market trends as to style, color, size, and shapes, current prices for better bags, for if we are to make any money we will have to aim for the higher price brackets, or else produce a large quantity of only one kind. What bag fittings are being used, kinds of lining, what kind of frames will we use and at what cost? All of these are questions which have to be considered and answered. To know what is being done in this field and to learn what the market trends and trade requirements are, one must subscribe to the Trade and Gift Shop magazines. It is necessary to know what other people are doing not with the idea of copying their work, but of improving ones own work. It should be a matter of ethics with every craftsman not to copy others work, but to design ones own, and at the same time know what others are doing in the same field. Also one must study the market to see if there is some thing the public is asking for, of which there is a limited supply. See what is the demand or what demand can be created in an open market. Sometimes the question may come up as to a thing being in or out of style. This was answered by a buyer for an exclusive shop as follows; - "After all we tell our customers what to buy by our displays and so help set the style." This is something which craftsman may well think a good deal about, for recognizing market trends is a most important part of this whole business of selling ones craft products.

Cost of Production. When ones objective is to sell, it is essential to produce an article as low in cost as is possible, and sell it for as much as is possible. Some of the items which make up this cost of production are the workroom and its loom equipment, and the overhead charges which include rent, light, heat, working time, etc. and some of the intangible values such as the time and effort of past years spent to learn to weave, or on the study of design and color etc. for which no salary was earned. The professional craftsman should endeavor to make the present pay for past effort and time as far as possible. Reputation is another intangible value, known more generally in the commercial world as business good-will. Certainly every one wishes to build up a good reputation and good will of the public. This is based on a number of qualities, but sometimes it seems as though it were a matter of luck by being taken up by the right people, or on a certain degree of showmanship. But I like to feel that the best results come from ones having a definite purpose and objective built up over a period of years. This is slow, but is dependable, sure, and best in the long run of things, it has seemed to me.

The Loom Room. As this is the workroom, care and thought should be given to its equipment and arrangement as to light, heat etc. There should be suitable closets for the storage of yarns and threads. Filing cabinets are useful for samples as well as for correspondence. Chests of drawers for finished work and book cases for reference books might also be considered as necessary furniture. And of course the number and kind of looms must be carefully chosen. The loom should be one which fits the type of weaving to be done. If heavy rugs are to be woven for sale the loom should be built to meet this requirement, or if linens only are to be done, this might influence one to choose a lighter easier loom to operate. For instance if a person is intending to weave dress material to sell, an example of an impractical loom to buy would be an upright tapestry loom. Always get the best and easiest loom to do the weaving you are planning to do on it, and keep it in good condition and repair. Winders, warp reels, bobbins and shuttles, reeds of several sizes should also be a part of good loom room equipment.

Materials. Materials are the threads and yarns of the weaver's stock and trade. One of the most important factors about this is the necessity for having reliable sources of supply where price is reasonable for the quality purchased. Keep a supply of sample cards and prices lists on hand always, and purchase in as large a quantity as possible, in order to get the best prices possible.

Have these sample cards and price lists filed and easily available for easy reference use. Record all purchases of yarns or equipment from each firm with the date, quantity, kind, price per pound and total amount expended, including postage or express.

Value of Time. The value to put on ones weaving time is difficult to solve. The amateur weaver usually reckons her cost of materials and hours of time spent, but never stops to consider if that time has any market value in a competitive market or not. Generally it has not. Recently I saw a handwoven coat, all the wool handspun and hand dyed, which had been woven on an 18" tapestry loom. It was marked for sale and the price \$1000. Now I knew, although the general public would not know, that this coat, from the point of the time spent in the making of it, might possibly be worth that much. But this price was ridiculous, because the woman who had the \$1000. to spend for a coat, would prefer something quite different from that one, both in style as well as quality. This question of time needs much study, for on this depends to a great extent whether it pays to weave a certain article for sale or not, the market for the article must be considered. Several years ago a wealthy customer of mine asked me to make a dozen fine all wool sheets, and came to me to see what I would weave them for her for. I told her \$50.00 each. She gave me the order and made an advanced payment of one half the purchase price at once. This might seem at first too much, but I know that for commercial ones she would have to pay \$40.00 each, and she wanted the handmade ones. They were woven of Bernat's finest Kashmir wool yarn and very beautiful when finished. The point is here that the market came to me. If I had woven those sheets first and then tried to sell them for \$50.00 each, the problem of finding the customer would have been practically impossible, which was the important factor in this whole thing. This brings us to the question of marketing of handweaving which will be later discussed. Careful time records should be kept on all articles made for sale. In estimating the cost of an article, figure in the time for setting up the loom and preparing to weave, the amount of warp required etc. Threading time and set up is generally easy to estimate at about 100 threads an hour for the width of the loom. Possibly some people may thread much faster than that. For a simple threading draft one could do it much quicker than a complicated threading with many changes.

Reckoning the Actual Cost of an Article. First consider the quantity, kind, and price of the yarns and threads used, second the number of hours for the weaving at so much per hour. To this add perhaps 50% or so for the overhead charges etc. In this way you can arrive at a selling price.

How To Sell Handweaving. Here we have the same business problem as in selling any other article, and the serious craftsman should approach it in that way. Selling to ones friends may be an easy way to begin or it may not. It has always seemed to me to be the best policy not to sell to my intimate friends on account of personal problems which might enter into the transaction. There is beginning in this country now many craft organizations which are offering outlets for weaving. Weavers should identify themselves with this movement and become a part of it. They should subscribe for craft and other magazines which might help to give them new ideas and ways of working, and to learn of needs of the markets they wish to contact. Local exhibits at church or county and state fairs may help to gain a reputation, although they may not be especially profitable from the point of view of sales. The question often comes up as to whether it is advisable to sell outright or on consignment. Of course if you can sell outright, you know your sale is made whether it is to a shop or a person. There are several important points which will be listed below which I hope will be of help.

1. If selling on consignment, know to whom you are consigning your weaving, the type of shop they have, the kind of trade they have, whether your things will be insured against fire and theft or not etc. or in other words know the shop.
2. Find out the kind of weaving they want, and then give them what they want, or else create something they want to sell. Simply because you may think your things are all right does not make them so, if that particular shop does not like them or feels that their customers will not buy them. Keep in personal touch with the shop, know what sells and what does not, yourself, and why, if possible.
3. And always be sure your weaving is styled right as well as perfectly woven and made up. Keep to standard sizes, and to season colors also for success.