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1998

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Foster Nicholson, Laura, "Making It the "Old-Fashioned Way"" (1998). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 198.

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Making It the "Old-Fashioned Way"

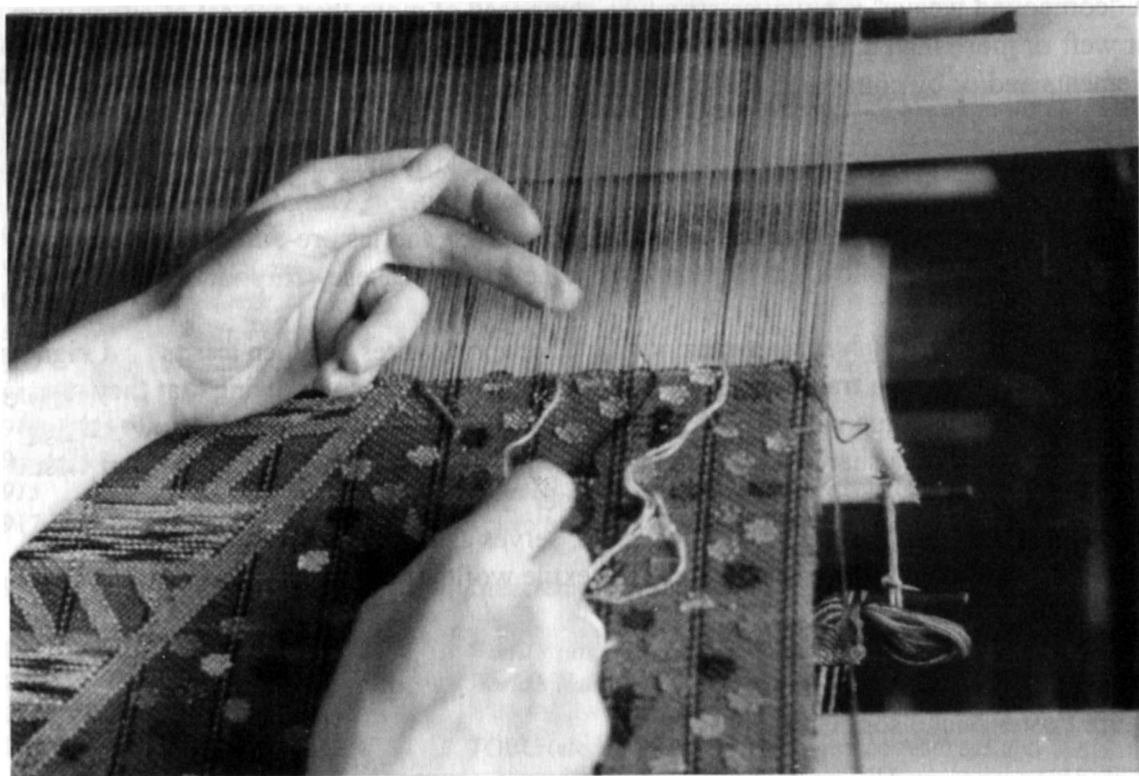
Laura Foster Nicholson, Chicago, Illinois

It is tempting to consider the process I am about to describe as the result of a point of view which is subjective and maybe even romantic. Although the adjective "old-fashioned" as used in the title carries a certain amount of ironic wit, in fact my method of weaving is ancient and timeless. I chose it because it is the only way I can adequately convey the majority of my ideas about the textile world. I also work this way because I love the process itself. I have tailored my ideas, and risked hobbling them, in order to continue to indulge in a way of working that suits me eminently.

I weave objects which I call tapestries, although technically they are compound twill fabrics with images composed of discontinuous inlaid wefts. The structure is a three-harness twill; the ground is warp-faced and the inlaid areas are weft-faced. I selected the

structure after studying the three-harness twill tapestry of Kashmiri shawls. The structure confers the ability to express acutely refined detail while yielding the drape necessary for a shawl's function. I adapted the weave to an inlay structure in order to economize on the time spent in weaving. In fact, I weave quite rapidly as a result, often more than 12" a day. I am also able to exploit both warp and weft as design elements. The sett of my warp is relatively fine, 30 epi, which gives the work good detail and yet is a large enough scale to be able to see easily the interaction of colors between individual threads.

Inserted inlay wefts are used for the building of specific images. The shortness of the float (over two, under one) gives maximum control when shaping contours. And the inlay thread conveniently hides the ground weft, giving a greater difference in appearance between figure and ground.



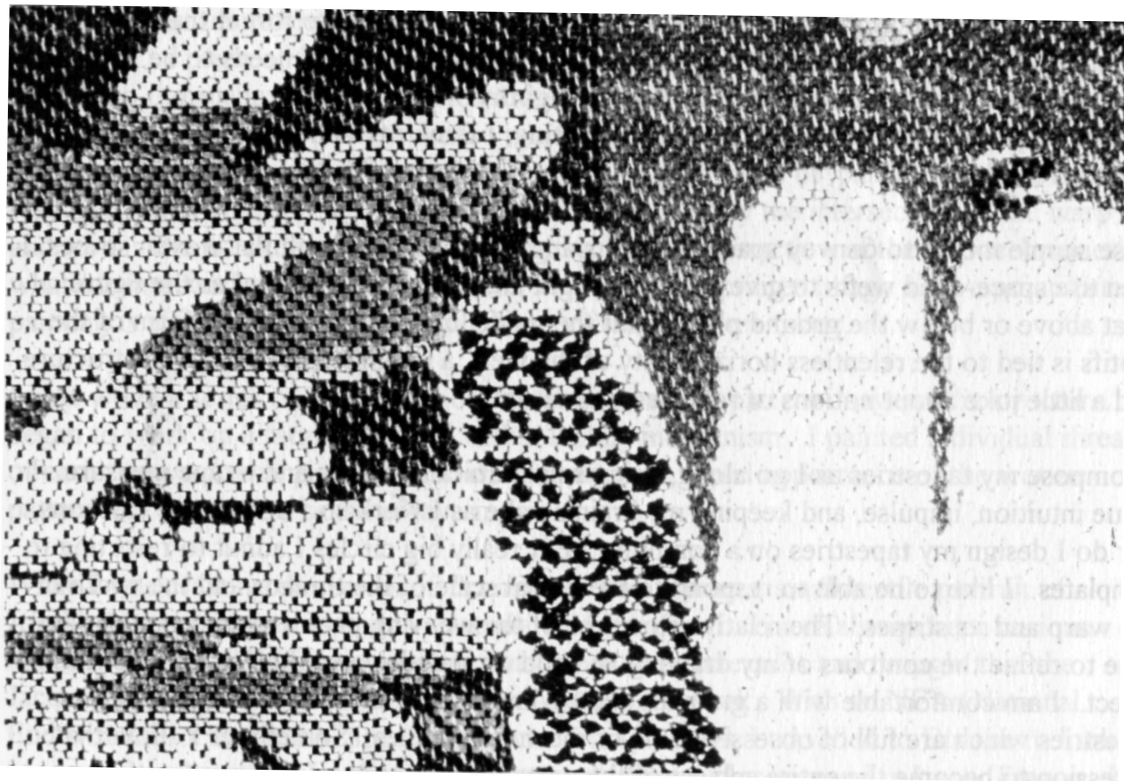
Laura Foster Nicholson weaving twill brocade with hand-inserted discontinuous weft

Most frequently, the ground warp and weft are wool, and the inlay threads are mercerized cotton embroidery floss, with some ikatted wools. The matte, saturated ground color sets off the lustrous areas of inlay, making them appear to float in space. Since 1/3 of the warp is always visible as a tie-down, the gloss fools the eye into ignoring the color of the tie-down warp. Nonetheless, the weft-faced inlaid areas are not completely opaque which allows the eye to wander between the planes of information.

An infinite range of color is available when using discontinuous wefts. The warp is threaded in an end-and-end combination of relatively warmer and cooler hues in order to

compliment a greater variety of weft colors. Warp striping is often used as a framework on which to hang imagery or as the definition of a ground plane against which the inlay floats.

The structure and weaving process are as simple and straightforward as possible. Control of the drawing is of paramount importance. More complex pattern weaves provide floats which interfere with the forming images in my work. I have evolved methods of drawing which are responsive to the simple geometries of the woven grid and the twill line -- not quite 45 degrees. There is a balance between relying on these inherent geometries and bringing in curvilinear and organic forms. It is a compelling challenge to find "suitable" subjects for this conventionalized form of drawing, and a source of satisfaction to invent new methods for depicting subjects which, because of detail or texture or form, would seem improbable to translate into woven cloth.



Detail of "Work Gloves and Cauliflower", 1995 by Laura Foster Nicholson

Rather than using weave structure as a source of texture and pattern, I usually make any obvious patterns by hand with inlay wefts. Whether I use identical or differing motifs, it's nearly all the same in terms of my time. Each individual element is inserted independently, and each can vary in a minuscule or a dramatic way from its neighbor. In the Indo-Persian convention of nodding the head of the flower to the left in one row and the right in the next row, a pattern which would otherwise prove static is given liveliness. If the individual motifs of a pattern are made with hand-inserted inlay threads, it is a simulation

of repetition. Pattern is hence a convention paid homage to, rather than a convenient form of covering an area with reproducible information.

In a chaotic world and a messy studio, I find the orderliness of a loom reassuring and challenging. I love arriving at the taut flat work surface and beginning to insert news and information between the threads. I find the very limitations that send so many would-be weavers away, the hundreds of straight threads and the relentless grid, are rules I can obey happily or challenge with reward. Even the loom setup time is a valuable and pleasurable interval of meditation and planning.

The subjects I choose and the manner of fixing them in space respond to my own and historic notions of the appropriateness of image to textile. I like to push the idea of representation. For example, how real can it look; how close can it come to seeming to have three dimensions before one forgets that one is looking at a flat woven textile? I'm not interested in realism as an end in itself. One must not be allowed to forget the textile surface and structure. The tension between the image and the cloth needs to be stretched tight, but it must never be ignored. I think of Pugin's contempt for the absurd verisimilitude of Victorian rose-scattered carpeting; I think of William Morris's layered and interwoven planes.

I use simple means to convey space. Establishing a textile plane with flat woven stripes, I then use space-dyed wefts to give a sense of light and shadow which makes the figure float above or below the ground plane. But the modelling employed on the form of the motifs is tied to the relentless horizontality of the weft, a reminder of the woven structure and a little joke about notions of representationalism.

I compose my tapestries as I go along, using small, quick sketches and a tape measure. I value intuition, impulse, and keeping my brain awake as I work so I do not use cartoons, nor do I design my tapestries on a computer. For really big circles I admit to resorting to templates. I like to be able to respond to the actual scale of the threads and the width of the warp and its stripes. The relative slowness of the weaving pace assures me plenty of time to refine the contours of my drawing and add on impulse a wild bit of color or an insect. I am comfortable with a gradual, line-by-line development. At times I make tapestries which are full of obsessive dots or meandering lines. Sometimes I allow that obsession to become the entire subject of the piece. My intense involvement with the correct color of every pebble or squiggle in these pieces is enrapturing.

I hear many incredulous comments about how long it must take to weave in the way I do. But let me make this relative to you. It took me less time to weave an inch of pearls, for example, than it took me to access my horoscope on the Internet in the midst of the "Starr Report" frenzy. I have no patience with those who make a big fuss over how much time it must take to work in this way. What I do is a pure pleasure. It is indulgence in time and thought. I adore materials and hoard them as a vital source of renewal. The products which come from my loom are luxury items in the true sense. The works represent my refusal to skimp on color, on detail, on time and my insistence to make what I long to see.

I am ever curious about textiles, and I make all sorts of other textile things. I sew, I knit. I design on the computer and weave on an electronic Jacquard loom when I can. But I can only make my "tapestries", which are the very essence of my textilian thought, in the way I have been practicing for 20 years: slowly, thoughtfully, and with my hands intertwined with every thread.