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Asymmetry: Aesthetics and Politics of Ply-split Braiding

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Ply-split braiding involves the interworking of tightly plied cords by use of a tool that parts the plies of one cord and draws a second cord through the space between the plies of the first. It is an old textile-making technique that persists most prominently in Rajasthan, where it is used most to make highly patterned straps that adorn camels,¹ and in Tibet and Bhutan, where it is used to make patterned saddle blankets and straps (Figure 1). Collingwood (1998) has provided the fullest description of traditional ply-split braiding in Rajasthan, with emphasis on the dramatic, symmetrical, geometric patterning of many of the best camel straps. The two structures most used in these straps are plain oblique twining (POT) (in which a given cord alternately splits and is split by the cords it meets along its path) and single-course oblique twining (SCOT) (in which a cord may split [or be split by] several cords sequentially). Following the publication of Collingwood's book, fiber artists in many countries adapted ply-split braiding to three-dimensional forms, frequently in the form of baskets. Many of these pieces of contemporary fiber art also featured bold symmetric patterning.² The emphasis on symmetry (both mirror symmetry and rotational symmetry) permitted demonstration of technical control of materials and tension as well as highlighting elaborate surface design, rigorously executed -- values clearly embraced by both traditional and contemporary ply-split braiders.

□



Figure 1. Detail of a goat-hair tang from Rajasthan, with symmetric patterning worked in plain oblique twining (POT) and single-course oblique interlacing (SCOT) (see text).³

Asymmetry in ply-split braiding has received much less attention. Collingwood and others have described one style of ply-split braiding, which he calls two-layer oblique interlacing, that is used in Rajasthan to make straps with representational and often asymmetric images (e.g., of camels), generally set in a symmetric frame,⁴ but these are exceptional. This paper attempts to document the use of asymmetry in contemporary ply-split braiding and to explore the reasons for and

¹ See Harvey, Quick and Stein, Collingwood

² For example, Peters 374, Hendrickson et al. (2004) 18, 20, 39, Hendrickson (2010), Hedges (2011) 57, Fraser (2009, 2010, 2012)

³ Image from David W. Fraser. All other images are from the listed artist.

⁴ Collingwood 145, 179

against its use in this expanding art form. The focus is on, primarily, the violation of mirror reflection or rotational symmetry in the physical arrangement of cords and, secondarily, those symmetry violations due to color or texture differences between cords and between plies; asymmetry inherent in the spinning of yarns and plying of cords or in the finishing of the work is ignored.

Asymmetry is interesting. In studies of perception of arrays of black and white squares, Smets (1973) has shown that those with a mid-range of complexity and redundancy -- asymmetry without overwhelming randomness -- elicit the most arousal, are judged the most beautiful and the most pleasant. De Waal praises the asymmetry of netsuke and Japanese tea bowls in observing "... you cannot understand the whole from a part."⁵



Figure 2, left. Variation on Camel Girth #5 by Kay Sekimachi, 1976. The girth comprises 6 symmetrically arrayed white columns of SCOT worked in mop cord, rendered asymmetric only by the addition of selected cords dyed brown or black.

Figure 3, right. Pink and Wisteria Bags by Sandy Jessett.

Examples of symmetry in contemporary ply-split braiding can be divided into three broad groupings: highly tailored rule-breaking, free-form open work and organic forms. Highly tailored rule-breaking refers to work that has many of the formal qualities of symmetric ply-split braiding, but a distinct symmetry violation that disturbs that formality. In an early example Kay Sekimachi added color asymmetrically to a hanging that closely mimicked one style of Rajasthan camel girth (Figure 2). Sandy Jessett's bags have a highly formal array of alternating SCOT panels, but color variation on the flap of the one on the right breaks the symmetry. (Figure 3) Linda Hendrickson repeatedly changes the angle of the SCOT on one side of a necklace,

⁵ de Waal 12

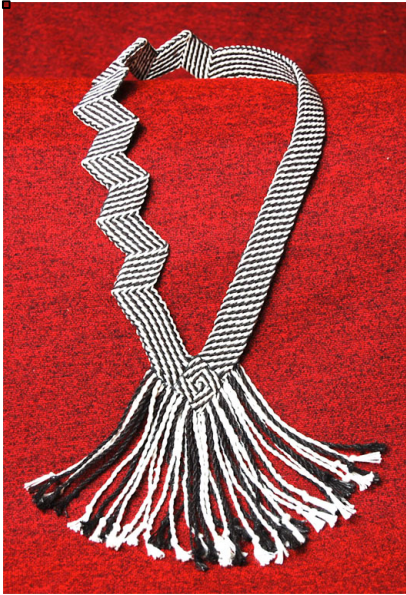


Figure 4, left. Zig-zag Necklace by Linda Hendrickson.

Figure 5, right. Hat by Rieko Yamane.

breaking the symmetry (Figure 4). Rieko Yamane has fashioned a hat with a symmetric base in POT and symmetric sides in SCOT, but with a broad SCOT brim with radiating points of irregular length (Figure 5). Barbara Walker has tried to evoke the randomness of the aging process of jeans in a basket in which patches of POT and SCOT of varying size and shape are juxtaposed (Figure 6). Anne Dyer's whimsical figures rarely show asymmetry except in their poses, but the hair of the tree dweller in Figure 7 is asymmetric. David Fraser's cylindrical basket is radially symmetric except for the placement and length of the five handles (Figure 8. *It illustrates the sole solution to the problem of placing 5 queens on a 5x5 chessboard, folded into a cylinder, so that no queen can take another.*) Each of the five round POT platters in Figure 9 is symmetric, but he has joined them in a fashion that makes the whole asymmetric.

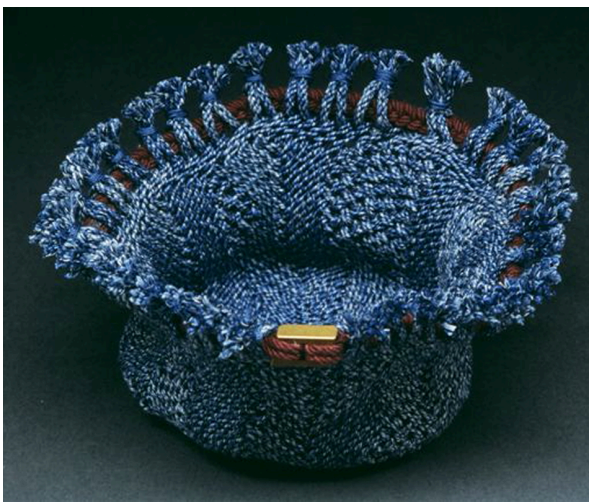


Figure 6. Faded Blues by Barbara Walker.



Figure 7. Human figure by Anne Dyer.



Figure 8. Modulo 5 by David W. Fraser, 2009.



Figure 9. *R/evolve II* by David W. Fraser, 2012.

Free-form open work is made possible in ply-split braiding by the ability of a tightly plied cord to hold firmly in place a cord that splits its plies. By widely separating intersections of cords (in contrast to the usual 1/4-turn of each cord between splittings in POT) open work can be made that holds its form. Kay Sekimachi has probably explored free-form openwork in ply-split braiding as much as anyone. The basket in Figure 10 was made with synthetic raffia. Beginning around 2004 she began her Twinelines series (Figure 11). Other examples of free-form openwork that have been published include those by Minami Ishibashi (*White Foam*)⁶ and Yoshimi Fukushima (*Wall Hanging*).⁷ David Fraser has explored the openwork basketry form (Figure 12) and openwork based on POT braids (Figure 13)



Figure 10. *Basket with Sphere* by Kay Sekimachi, 2003.



Figure 11. *Twinelines* by Kay Sekimachi with wooden bowls by her late husband, Bob Stocksdale.

⁶ Hendrickson et al. (2004) 32

⁷ <http://www.lindahendrickson.com/spliterati-01-yoshimi-wall-hanging.htm>



Figure 12, left. Red Pod by David W. Fraser, 2012.

Figure 13, right. Song by David W. Fraser, 2012.

Organic forms comprise the most disparate of the groupings of asymmetric ply-split braiding. Julie Hedges's complex sculpture demonstrates the versatility of ply-split braiding, in this case emphasizing SCOT (Figure 14). Eriko Oda has made a series of wall hangings in a combination of SCOT and POT, with panels with a 1/2-twist between cord intersections alternating with the more usual 1/4-twist, that beautifully evoke wind and other emanations (figures 15-16.)



Figure 14, left. Skeletal Form by Julie Hedges.

Figure 15, center. Take Shelter by Eriko Oda, 2009.

Figure 16, right. Breath by Eriko Oda, 2010.



*Figure 17, top left. Water Worn IV by Jennie Parry.
Figure 18, top right. Blue Horns by Katoko Kitade, 2011.
Figure 19, bottom left. Sisterhood by David W. Fraser, 2011.
Figure 20, bottom right. Poise by David W. Fraser, 2010.*

Jenny Parry has further deconstructed the SCOT braid in her evocation of water (Figure 17). Katoko Kitade has taken a different approach emphasizing the dense, plastic qualities of irregular organic growth, as are most readily demonstrated in POT (Figure 18). Fraser has also used POT to emphasize plasticity in two of his organic forms (Figures 19 and 20). Other organic examples of asymmetric ply-splitting have been published by Hatsue Hada, Sugane Hara, Yasuko Hoshino, Keiko Mizutani and Noriko Morishita⁸ and exhibited by Hiroko Motoyama.⁹

⁸ See Hendrickson et al. (2004) 28, 29, 31, 34, 35

⁹ <http://lindahendrickson.com/spliterati-01-hiroko-white-coral-reef.htm>

As I have gathered images of asymmetric ply-split braiding from around the world, I have sought out the opinions of expert ply-split braiders about asymmetric work. Their thoughts differ widely but illuminatingly. The great Swiss braid analyst, writer and teacher Noémi Speiser, whose set of seven spectacular symmetrical ply-split braided shoes were featured at Spliterati-01,¹⁰ is reserved about asymmetry in ply-split braiding. She writes “[Certain asymmetric pieces] remind us of vegetational growth: tree-trunks, coral reefs, moss or mushrooms: obeying certain natural laws and still free to do what they like or what they are urged to do to avoid obstacles and resist winds and water and other influences -- or according to their own pleasure. The result is ... curious and grotesque rather than beautiful.”¹¹ The British weaver and teacher Anne Dyer finds practical reasons to avoid asymmetry. She writes, “The reason people stick to symmetry, I think, is because you only have to think once per round ... It also keeps us on known ground with a certainty of a successful outcome. Symmetric design nearly always looks good, being balanced, and it is much easier to make a right mess in asymmetric work.”¹² The Minnesota-based weaver and teacher Louise French makes the case for asymmetry: “Quite often I prefer asymmetric design over symmetric. There is often an element of surprise; delight; in some cases, humor that brings a smile; and unpredictability which I enjoy. Yes, asymmetry can be unattractive, but well done it is beautiful. Symmetry is safe, but can also be boring.”¹³ The Japanese knitter and occasional ply-split braider Minami Ishibashi waxes poetic about freeing oneself from constraints like symmetry: “Removing limitations about shape, material, colour or size is a real challenge.

What matters most then, is the theme of the work. Searching for that theme becomes an important task. You always have to look for it in order to find it. Sometimes you’ll find it within the quality of the materials, or the techniques you use. You might just as easily find it in a flower in a field, a pebble in the road or an advertisement poster in a town. You might just as easily find it somewhere more abstract: in yourself.”¹⁴

The examples of asymmetric ply-split braiding cited here, together with the reflections of expert ply-split braiders, suggest both similarities and differences in the values of ply-split braiding illustrated by symmetric and asymmetric work. Like symmetric ply-split braiding, asymmetric ply-split braiding values technical control of materials and tension, but asymmetric ply-split braiding places much less emphasis than does symmetric work on elaborate surface design, rigorously executed. Asymmetric ply-split braiding puts much more emphasis than does symmetric work on what might be called sculptural poise: graceful or dramatic, often complex, shaping; the whole that cannot be understood from a part. One’s aesthetic politics may largely determine whether one is inclined to see asymmetric ply-split braiding as “curious” and “grotesque” or “challenging” and “delightful”; to see it as “not beautiful” or “beautiful.” But if it is not a “right mess”, it is likely not to be “boring.”

¹⁰ See Hendrickson et al. (2004) 21

¹¹ Letter from Noémi Speiser to the author, 22 March 2012.

¹² Letter from Anne Dyer to the author, 28 February 2012.

¹³ Email from Louise French to the author, 10 January 2012.

¹⁴ http://www.knitjapan.co.uk/features/c_zone/ishibashi/work.htm

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