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VELVETWEAVING TODAY: A WORLDWIDE OVERVIEW**BARBARA SETSU PICKETT**bpickett@uoregon.edu

Velvet is a luxury cloth. Fashioned into garments, it dresses the Elite. In Interiors, it covers walls and upholsters furniture. Its sumptuous display denotes status, power, privilege and wealth. For the past twenty-eight years, my research and art has focused on learning its traditions and handweaving practice. Besides studying textile archives, I have more importantly visited the few remaining ateliers and have interviewed the artisans to learn about their training, methods and activities. My research has taken me to seven countries where I have found 16 ateliers that still weave velvet. About thirty-five master designer/weavers of silk velvet remain. At each I study:

How do they control the tension of the pile warp?
How do they prevent crushing the woven velvet while it is on the loom?
How do they cut the pile loops?
How do they control the pattern and design?
How does the choice of ground weave effect the cloth?
How were they trained and how do they train?

My interest in the woven structure of velvet started in 1981 at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. In the Textile Study Room I came upon a description and diagram done by Natalie Rothstein that explained that velvet takes two sets of warps, a pile and a ground. The pile is created on the loom by lifting the pile warp over a slim velvet wire that is woven in, thus secured by crossing ground wefts. After several wires, the initial one is pulled out leaving a row of the tiny loops of uncut pile, or it can be cut out by inserting a knife point into a miniscule channel on the top of the velvet wire and drawing it across, selvage to selvage, to leave a tufted row. It sounded insane, deliberate destruction to make a sumptuous fabric. It was clear unweaving was not an option. Once cut one could only forge on. This kamikaze aesthetic fascinated me.

I remembered visiting the marvelous Lisio shop in Florence, Italy in 1978 where I saw handwoven velvets. I found the brochure I saved and wrote to them. Thanks to an Oregon Arts Commission Individual Artist award, I returned to Florence in 1984 to examine more closely the velvet weaves and even more importantly met Vittorio Rettori, Lisio's superb Jacquard technician and masterweaver. In an afternoon I was sure that Vittorio was the key to understanding the mysteries of velvet. I was hooked. I was not satisfied to just look: I wanted to do.

In 1986/87 I received a Fulbright Junior Research fellowship that funded seven months at the Foundation Lisio. I helped set up a manual Jacquard loom and learned the skills to operate the fly shuttle, the velvetloom's *cantra* with its 800 bobbins and intricate mountings. There was a lot to learn: an apprenticeship generally takes six to seven years. Every few days Vittorio gave me more challenging designs to weave. I progressed steadily from voided cut velvets to voided cut velvets with supplementary weft enrichments to voided cut and uncut, *ciselé* velvets. At the end of my program I punched the pattern cards for a small original design and was able to weave it off. In 1994 I returned to study polychrome velvets under the instruction of Eva Basile. In 1996 I offered the first University of Oregon, Department of Art, Fibers Area program where I brought a small group of students to the Foundation Lisio to learn the silk Jacquard weaves in a three-week intensive summer course. Offered every other summer, this year marked our eighth time. Now Oriana Castagnozzi is Lisio's master production velvet weaver. Lisio has done important commissions for haut couture houses like Fendi, Valentino, Versace and Gucci. One of their *ciselé* velvets was fashioned into ecclesiastical cap for the current pope.

In Venice I visited the prestigious firm Lorenzo Rubelli and Son and met the current head Alessandro Favaretto Rubelli. At the weaving workshop, the *laboratorio*, I met the head technician Siviero Udino and the two masterweavers Paola Gianni and Giuseppina Cosmo. Their mountings were similar to Lisio's, but the organization of the bobbin rack, *cantra*, was very different. Instead of having a single bobbin for each warp pile, here each bobbin carried a pile unit for each repeat. When the design was repeated four times across the warp, then the bobbin would carry four pile units. The bobbin itself was not a single spool but a doubled spool. Unfortunately Rubelli has closed its handweaving laboratory, but it has saved the equipment and hopefully one day will reactivate it.

In 1997 on a Gladys Kriebel Delmas Foundation award I was able to spend a month at Venice's other venerable silk weaving family firm, Luigi Bevilacqua, established in 1875. There I worked primarily with two masterweavers, Mariella Bearazi and Anna Maria Zandalli. They were a treasure trove of information. Velvetweaving is an oral tradition where master passes down the secrets to the apprentices. In times past an apprentice at Bevilacqua would learn all the silk weaves (damask, lampas, brocade, and velvet) and would become a specialist in one or two. All the silk weaves have been adapted to the powerloom, except for cut and uncut voided velvet, so now the handweavers concentrate on velvets in all its variations. Mariella and Anna Maria were trained in all the silk weaves. Now they are retired, but Mariella's daughter Chiara has become a Bevilacqua velvetweaver.

In Zoagli, a small town near Rapallo, I found two more silk weaving ateliers, the Seterie di Zoagli Cordani and the Tessitura Artigiana Gaggioli. The Cordani family has always been *mercanti*, the merchant force guiding production and marketing. Rosalba Azzaro taught me the techniques of weaving the famous *velluto liscio*, smooth solid velvet cloth, with the special swinging beater, the *cassa battente snodata*, and Rita Solari emphasized the importance of finding the right balance in sett and density for sound cloth. The Gaggioli family headed by Sergio and his wife Lorenza, and now by their children, did it all, from design, to loom, to market. Their hands-on expertise is immense. I want to return to continue my investigation of the special velvet made specifically for jewelry cases where the pile must be extremely low, dense and still flexible to lie smoothly over the forms of the cases.

In Lyon, France, Prella is renowned for their exquisite silk cloths. It is the oldest European firm still weaving velvet. Established in 1752, more than 250 years ago, Prella's archives include the transforming of the operations from drawloom to Jacquard. Currently four looms weave velvet. Their bobbin racks, *cantra*, hold 1600 pile bobbins. I learned how to use a temple to maintain constant weaving width and saw a collection of unusual velvet wires that could create pile of varying heights and undulating piles.

Also in the outskirts of Lyon is the atelier Tassanari and Chatel. They are lauded for their excellent dyeing as well as silk weaving. I saw wonderful examples of velours chiné where the pile warps are dyed before weaving to form floral patterns in solid velvet. Like Prella their designers were in house. They are capable of weaving complex polychrome velvets.

In Sauvessanges, France I met Agnes Alauzet, a superb velvetweaver who had graduated from the Superior School of Textiles in Lyon and had received the coveted Best Craftsman in France award in 1990. She had several Verdol looms and wove commissions for others as well as her own splendid designs. Now I believe, she has returned to Croix-Rousse in Lyon and directs the Maison des Canuts.

Also in France two master design and velvetweavers who used to be the head technician at Lisio have their own operations, Thierry Favre and Franz Ippoldt. Both have invaluable historical and practical knowledge of velvetweaving.

In Sudbury, England, Richard John Humphries is the last remaining master of velvet. He analyzes and weaves all types of silks to restore the finest interiors. His looms produce the velvets for the Knight of the

Garner and the Knight of the Thistle. His purple velvet forms the luscious background for the jewels in the crown. Being the last apprentice in the Warner Mills that made the coronation robe for Queen Elizabeth II, it would be a fitting tribute for him to create the next monarch's coronation robe.

In Hereke, Turkey, on an Institute of Turkish Studies grant in 2002, I met R. Koray Dagçi, head of the Ipekli Dokuma Fabrikasi, the last silkweaving workshop of the Ottoman Empire. Then nine weavers were employed, paid by the Ministry of Culture, and three could weave velvet. Two were masters, *usta*, and one an apprentice. When I returned in 2008, ten weavers were worked on two sites, six in Hereke and four in Istanbul. The two patterned velvet (*çatma kadife*) weavers are related, the father in Hereke and the son in Istanbul. The pile warps are wound on double bobbins like at Bevilacqua and in France.

In Japan velvet is produced by an entirely different method. In Kyoto, Kunikazu Ito is a master velvet carver. His task starts after the cloth is taken from the loom. It comes to him as a bolt of solid uncut velvet with all the wires still in. First he makes a *katagami* stencil of the design, places it flat on the velvet's woven wire surface, and pounces a fine talc powder to temporarily mark the design. Then he takes his velvet knife that he fashioned himself from an old bicycle spoke, and carefully cuts on the top of the rods where the white powder indicates. The cut loops appear much darker than the uncut ones, and the design emerges. Master Ito did 16-petal chrysanthemum design that adorns the chair that the Emperor uses when opening the Diet each year. He has also done restoration velvets for imperial villas. He is retired now and unfortunately has no apprentice to preserve his knowledge and carry on the work.

In Nagahama, Japan, Eikichi Higuchi, an innovative Jacquard technician and master velvet designer worked until recently. Instead of using metal rods to create the pile loops, Master Higuchi has ingeniously substituted a fine monofilament. He also created a device to cut the selvage ends of the monofilament loops and extract them. He has experimented with dyeing and combining the traditions of Yuzen silk painting to velvet. His inventiveness is apparent in many small ways.

In China, the Suzhou Silk Museum has the last velvet drawloom in its demonstration hall. It takes two to operate this *Zhang rong* loom. The masterweaver, Zhu Yunxiu, controls the treadles and throws the shuttles inserting and cutting out velvet rods and passing the ground wefts. Her partner is the draw girl who is perched high, within the loom. Her job is to open each pattern shed by pulling back on the string loop that lifts the particular pile warps at that precise point in the design. They weave voided cut velvet on satin ground. The museum is the pride and joy of its founder and director Quan Xiaoping.

In the Ferghana Valley of Uzbekistan, Rasuljon Mirzaahmedov and Fazlitdin Dadajonov make ikat velvet. Carrying on his father's investigation, Master Mirzaahmedov received the prestigious Seal of Excellence award in 2005 from UNESCO for his research on and revitalizing of the silk ikat velvet tradition, *baghmal*. The cloth is solid velvet and rich array of colors and pattern are created from skillful dyeing before weaving.

This concludes a brief survey of contemporary velvetweaving. I have just got word that a young weaver in India is trying to revive that country's velvetweaving tradition. I wish him well and cannot wait to see his efforts.