



EARLY DECORATIVE WEAVING IN AMERICA

A COTTAGE CRAFT NOW BEING REVIVED

SEVENTH ARTICLE

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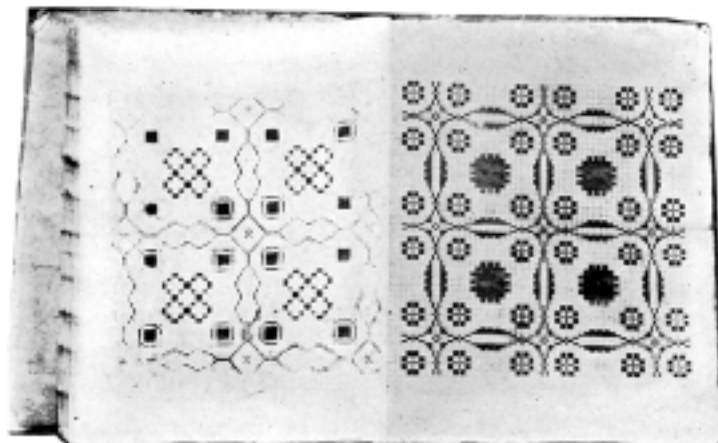
THE old fireside crafts have a glamor all their own. By the very simplicity and dignity of their homely products, they compel a far more general and sympathetic appreciation than many a higher type of art utterance. They afford a sincere expression of folk spirit and indicate an inherent love of beauty that effected a happy union, wherever it could, between art and common household objects of daily utility.

Crude, perhaps, these craft efforts often were, but, at the same time, they were so full of sincerity and fresh creative vigour that they command our reverent attention. Furthermore, a knowledge of the old fireside crafts, as they have been appropriately called, throws an interesting and valuable sidelight on the intimate domestic life of the people during the early formative period of Colonial existence, a period we are somewhat too prone to associate only with the sterner and more strenuous side of nation building.

Among all these "homespun" crafts, none was of more universal practice than the decorative weaving of coverlets for the imposing bedsteads in which the Eighteenth Century housewife took

such vast pride. In the Seventeenth, Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries, the bedstead was a far more conspicuous and important article of furniture than nowadays when our modern notions of sanitary propriety prompt us to have the equipment of our sleeping places as simple as possible. In the days of the Stuarts and during the reigns of William and Mary and Queen Anne the magnificence of the pillared and canopied bedstead and its trappings were indicative of the rank or affluence of the owner, while the truckle or trundle bed served for the children and the domestics of the household. The elaborate embroidered or brocaded hangings of the state bedsteads and the costly coverlets belonging to them were the objects of great care and esteem and were so highly prized that they were especially mentioned in inventories of household gear and bequeathed in wills.

During the whole of the Eighteenth Century, the heyday of the four-poster, bedsteads were regarded with special pride by our foremothers and their fitting equipment was a matter of much housewifely concern. In England the bed-chamber not infrequently



Old pattern or "Draft" Book with designs for coverlets. Probably compiled by one of the itinerant weavers of the latter part of the eighteenth century

did duty as a reception room while in the Colonies plenty of instances are on record where a great bedstead, fully garnished with valances, curtains and coverlet formed a part of the parlor furniture. Under the circumstances, the mistress of the house, quite naturally, wished her coverlets to present the best appearance they might and lavished a degree of pains upon them of which the modern housekeeper never dreams.

To the average woman in the Colonies, the rich silks and damasks employed by her more affluent sisters in England were out of the question, but with her characteristic resourcefulness and self-sufficiency, she set to work with the materials she had at hand and wrought fabrics that command our admiration, both for beauty of color and grace of design. These coverlets, which collectors eagerly search for today, were either entirely of home manufacture, the materials being spun, dyed and woven by the women of the family, or else the threads, spun and dyed ready for weaving, were given to a professional weaver who sometimes plied an itinerant trade, sometimes maintained a stationary loom. It is safe to say, however, that while the textures produced by the men who followed weaving as their regular business often excel in elaboration of pattern those made at home, the latter almost invariably possess a superior charm of color and individuality, eloquent of the loving pride woven into warp and woof by their makers.



Handwoven coverlet in blue, red and white, Late eighteenth century

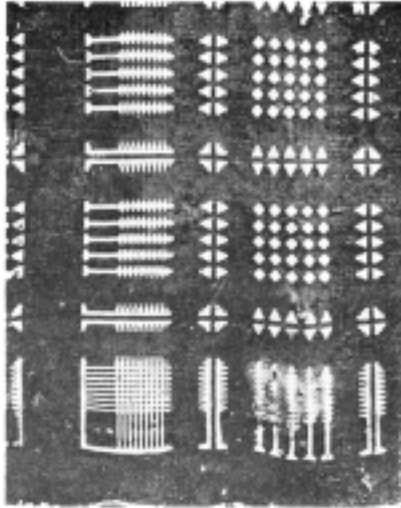


Blue and white double woven coverlet of late elaborate pattern.
The work of a professional weaver

Coverlet weaving was not a local craft confined to one or two sections of the country but was practiced from north to south, from New Hampshire to Georgia and the patterns used seem to have been the common property of the women from one end of the Colonies to the other. While certain well-known designs appear to have originated or to have enjoyed unusual popularity in certain localities at the same time, one is just as likely as not to find absolute identity of patterns in coverlets woven at the opposite ends of the land and oftentimes the identity extends to color as well as pattern. Doubtless patterns or "drafts," as they were called, were passed on from one woman to another and styles in coverlet designs traveled in much the same mysterious way as fashions in clothes.

A knowledge of the decorative weaving employed in making coverlets was more or less general in European countries and the wives of the American colonists preserved the tradition. Thus we may account for the general similarity in the character of the coverlets no matter whether they were made by colonists of English, French, Swedish, Dutch or German extraction. In minor details of pattern and color the influence of the maker's nationality is occasionally visible but in major features a remarkable uniformity prevails.

These coverlets were woven throughout the Eighteenth Century and continued to be made in considerable numbers till about the middle of the Nineteenth. Since that time their manufacture has



Home woven coverlet in dark blue, red and white.
Late eighteenth or early nineteenth century

side Industries of Berea College, in the Southern Mountains and at Asheville, N. C., so that the tradition of their fabrication is assured of being conscientiously perpetuated. Thanks to Eliza Calvert Hall's entertaining book, published several years ago, closer interest and wider attention have been directed to the old woven coverlet handicraft and the decorative and historic value attaching to the colored spreads that once adorned the beds of nearly every house in by-gone generations.

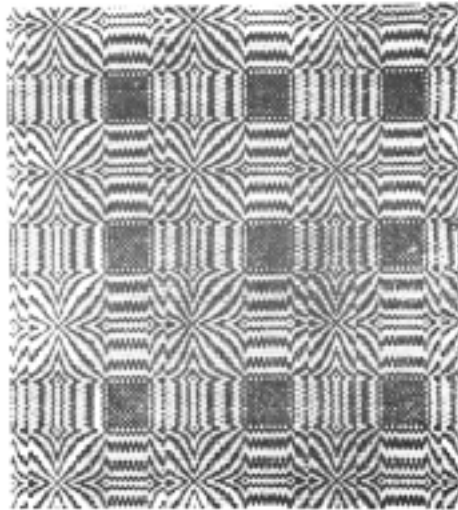
The hand-woven coverlets consisted of a "foundation of cotton or linen overshot with wool." In a vast number of cases the flax was spun, the linen woven, the yarn made and dyed and the coverlet woven by one woman, carrying out each successive process at her own fireside and using only such materials as the home farm supplied, for not a few of the Eighteenth Century housewives were as expert with the loom as they were with the spinning wheel and they were likewise adepts in the mysteries of the dye pot and knew how to make strong vegetable colors whose freshness time has been powerless to dim.

A great many of the Nineteenth Century coverlets were woven by itinerant weavers who carried their looms with them from farmstead to farmstead and did the year's stint of weaving, just as the itinerant cobbler paid his annual visit and made the year's supply of shoes for all the household

been practically restricted to the mountain regions of the South where so many old customs have lingered unchanged. The sterling craftsmanship value of these coverlets has won modern recognition and they are now made by the department of Fire-

from master and mistress down to swineherd and dairy-maid, but even till the time of the Civil War probably the majority of the women in the Southern mountains and in remote districts of other parts of the country did their own weaving and on many of the plantations in the South there was a room where an experienced slave spent most of the time weaving. Since so much of the coverlet weaving was done in this thoroughly individual manner, it would be strange indeed if the products of the isolated domestic looms did not show evidence of the weaver's originality in color arrangement and combination of patterns, although the methods of work and the limitations of design formation necessarily produced a generic similarity between the chief features of the spreads. The very act of decorative creation has always appealed to woman's imaginative faculty from the time of

Helen of Troy with her handmaidens, deftly plying the silken threads, or Queen Matilda and her tire-women, picturing on the Bayeux Tapestry the story of the Norman Conquest, down to the day when the work-hardened hand of the Colonial farmer's wife drove the shuttle to and fro as she wove the coverings to adorn her beds. The individual sense of color or harmony of design prompted many a housewife to act upon her own initiative and depart from the plan before her in the selection of her hues or the marshalling of her figures thus by the exercise



Home woven coverlet in blue and white.
Eighteenth century

of her inventive ingenuity originating new patterns to be handed on to her neighbors and by them in turn transmitted to others until in time they passed through the length and breadth of the land.



Home woven coverlet in blue and white. Late eighteenth or early nineteenth century

The later coverlets, woven by professional weavers whose greater skill enabled them to deviate from the rigidity of geometrical devices and conventional repeats, display patterns of great intricacy and elaboration, including human figures, birds and beasts as well as flowers, fruits and foliage in profusion.

It was customary to name the designs. Sometimes one design was known by two or three, or even more different names in different parts of the country and vice versa, the same name was occasionally applied to different designs in different localities. Occasionally these names were descriptive of the character of the designs but more frequently they were purely fanciful and dipped into the realms of poetry, politics, history or geography. We hear of "Sunrise," "Checkers," "Stripes and Squares," "Maid of Orleans," "Rose in the Valley," "Washington's Victory," "Missouri Trouble," "New Jersey Dream" and scores of others.

The colors most commonly used were blue, red

and white, but we also find a good deal of green, pink, yellow and saffron and sometimes other colors also make their appearance. The dyes employed, as previously stated, were of home manufacture and were derived from vegetable substances so that the colors are still fresh and vivid. The Colonial American woman showed herself quite as resourceful in the skillful preparation of a wide range of fast dyes as she did in other particulars and knew how to make cochineal, madder, Brazil wood, turmeric woad indigo, peach leaves, maple, hickory bark, sumac and a long array of other leaves, barks, roots, gums and blossoms yield all their varied hues. When there was one of them she could not obtain she always had a satisfactory substitute.

The collecting and study of the old hand-woven coverlets is well worth while both because of their intrinsic beauty of color and pattern and because of the light they throw on an important domestic craft of by-gone days which never quite died out and which has been successfully revived.