

Learning to Weave in Sweden

BY GERTRUDE HOSTRUP

WHEN I left America to spend a year or more abroad, I never intended to visit Sweden nor learn how to weave. Yet I did both. What a wealth of pleasant hours and surprises I had in store for me!

The art of weaving has been kept alive all these years in Sweden. In many other European countries weaving has smoldered during the industrial era, and very little interest in learning to weave was to be found. During the past few years in these nations dusty looms have been brought into use once again, and weaving has become an art. Sweden is one of the few countries that has retained an active interest in weaving from primitive times up to now. Although few people use their looms for making materials for wearing apparel, most Swedish weavers busy themselves making decorative articles for their homes. I found something appealing in learning to make rugs, pillows, couch throws, and wall hangings. Consequently, I decided to remain at Sätergläntan to try to learn how to weave such attractive products,—things which were so different from any other type of handicraft which I have seen in the United States.

Sätergläntan is a combined weaving school and resort near Insjön in the hills of Dalarna in north central Sweden. Any visitor would be charmed with the place because of its rustic aspects and its location in the wooded hills overlooking many lakes and valleys.

The main building is a colorful wooden structure for dining and living purposes. Most of the summer guests stay there while the students dwell in delightful log cabins along the winding road. In the main building there are many evidences of handwoven products. Curtains, draperies, wall-hangings, pillows, and linens were all hand-woven; dark blue, henna, and natural linen colors predominating. A person really gets a splendid lesson in weaving appreciation living in such an environment.

Every day just an hour before lunch lectures about textiles and weaving technique were given to us by Miss Langbers as we sat outside around a long table beneath the birch trees. Even though I knew very little about the Swedish language, I soon learned to understand practically all that was said to me. Each lecture was accompanied by passing out samples of the materials to be described in the day's lesson.

The weaving studio, a red, wooden, two-story building, had the first floor devoted to yarns and cottons, getting the warps ready to put on the looms, and to weaving linens and damasks. The second floor was filled with looms where students were busy from 8 A.M. till evening.

My first task was to prepare a warp for a rug, rose cotton with salt and pepper borders. Looms are so prevalent in Sweden that an introduction to them and other implements was not even considered. I, who had never seen a



The Weaving Studio Sätergläntan by Insjön, Sweden

loom, thought that making a warp was tedious and quite incomprehensible. All the counting! All the steps! After I started to weave this simple two-shafted pattern, I was overjoyed when I completed weaving two rugs in two days. I thought that all the irksome trials of getting a warp ready were really something to be forgotten by a weaver. Since then making a warp has been a period of happy anticipation for me.

As my next step I was to learn how patterns were made. An antique wall-hanging hung on the wall; a heavy linen warp for a similar one was on the loom. By experimenting I was to learn how and where to tread to make this Rose Path pattern with the yarns which I had on paper bobbins in a basket attached to the loom. After a day of trial and error I learned the fundamentals of pattern weaving. I wove on completing this long hanging, making an item which is really attractive and practical due to the neutral shades.

To understand the exact relation between threading and treading a pattern, I plucked 1500 fine cotton threads through the cotton heddles forming a concrete pattern for a table square. In doing this I learned how to read a pattern from a draft. Later the warm red, black, and green wool in the weft showed the design. I also tried a piece of double weaving which had the same pattern as my table square. I found that task very difficult. It was much easier for me to weave a few dainty coffee napkins with cotton and linen. I wanted to weave all linen serviettes, but my instructor thought that a cotton and linen combination was not nearly as difficult for a student to weave as all linen. The threads on the latter would be inclined to break. Miss Langbers thought that I should learn to weave materials for covering furniture, so I made a couple of samplers but that work did not appeal to me particularly at the time. Now I have found use for the lessons, and I am grateful for them.

Linen warps are always used at Sätergläntan with woolen wefts for all but the daintier things. Miss Langbers thought that a cotton warp such as the Indians use and a woolen weft just did not belong together.

One of my most pleasant lessons on such a linen warp was weaving a fireside pillow top. My cheerful soft yarns were dyed in the woods of Sweden, and they were a beautiful warm cherry-red and blue. In Sweden fireside pillows are quite prevalent. They are large and long so that two people who wish to gaze into the fire can comfortably sit on them instead of on some piece of furniture which cannot withstand the dry heat. For my fireside pillow Miss Langbers tried to teach me to make an original pattern to pluck in as my design. In our public schools I had only copied patterns and objects; I had never learned to create; but after my weaving instructor had made a rough sketch, I tried to formulate a design and inculcate it in my pillow. This really worked out better than I had anticipated. The



Winding Bobbins outside the Weaving Studio at Sätergläntan

center of the pillow was woven in blue wool with a shuttle, simple two-shafted weaving. In between each weft thread a cherry colored thread was drawn through at various places on the warp according to the pattern I had made, thus forming embroidery weaving or "Dukagång" as it was called in Sweden. At the two ends of the pillow were finger-plucked blue scalloped borders, my first lesson in simple tapestry weaving.

I shall never forget my instructions for my last piece of weaving, a square wall hanging, using no shuttle but my fingers to form the tapestry design. First I was to draw my pattern on sketching paper and graph paper all by myself. Next I was to choose my colors, any I wanted from the huge assortment in the cabinet. I went there, opened the doors, looked, and returned to Miss Langbers saying, "How can a person choose colors when there are so many to choose from? How does one know which colors harmonize best?" I had never studied color charts, but Miss Langbers gave me one of the best lessons when she took me outside and said, "Go out and look at the sky, the woods, Nature, and put your colors together as you see them there." I believe I shall always be able to recall the heavens which I saw that evening; a stormy sky had never seemed so colorful, so alive before.

My wall hanging does not depict that sky, but it does serve as a lovely reminder of my summer in Sweden. The various shades of the great varieties of moss, of the berries on the bushes, the trunks of the trees, the leaves of the birches, and the twilight are all in that hanging which I often call "My Masterpiece."

Sometimes we ran away from our weaving to celebrate a holiday, to take a long hike in the woods, to ride to some historical or scenic spot, or to greet the dawn. Everything was so delightful. Since I have returned to the United States, I have not woven as much or as often as I would like, but I shall never want to run away from it. I shall look forward to sitting at my Swedish loom, working, creating, and planning more and more articles to weave.