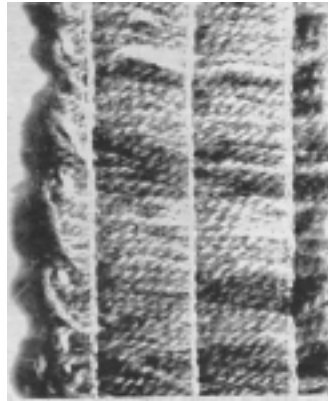


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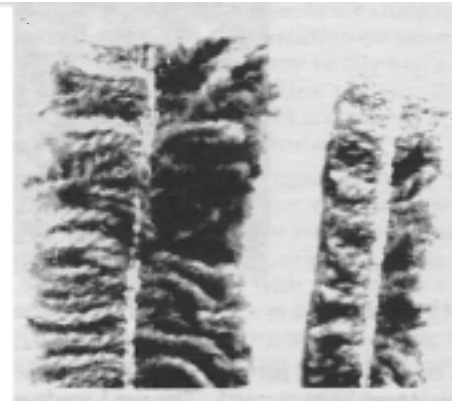
CHENILLE

A couple of years ago I was asked to give a sectional warping demonstration at the Guild. While looking for a weave that could be warped rapidly but would have some sort of special interest other than very few ends per inch, I came across directions for making chenille yarn in Harriet Tidball's monograph Two Harness Textiles: The Loom-controlled Weaves. At the time it suited my purpose ideally and since then I have done a little further experimenting.

When trying to find out a little more about chenille, I first quickly checked Verla Birrell's informative book The Textile Arts and found that it was first invented in 1839 by James Templeton and William Quigley in Glasgow for the carpet industry. Further searching in that handiest of all books, the 1911 edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica added a surprise tidbit of information. Chenille is usually thought of as a thread or yarn with a "fur feel," well apparently the word chenille is French meaning "a hairy caterpillar." I must admit it is an apt description of the yarn!



blanket material



cut chenille strips

Chenille yarn can be easily made on either a floor or frame loom. I have done both and naturally find the floor loom a bit faster, but both produce very satisfactory results.

The first step is to weave what is called the "blanket material." This requires a spaced warp of 20/2 cotton or some other relatively fine, strong thread. The warp yarn is set in the loom in groups of six arranged about an inch apart. (Tidball recommends eight but I prefer six, and this number is recommended by most of the literature I have read.) The distance between the groups of thread determines the height of the finished pile which should relate to the diameter of the weft used. In general the fatter the weft the greater the distance between the groups of warp threads.

If you are dressing your loom from the back to the front take your warp threads and beam then so they will fall in groups of six every inch. Then thread your harnesses for a tabby or plain weave. Finally bring all six threads through one dent in the reed. I usually use a six dent reed, but I have found a ten dent also works nicely. If you use a twelve or fifteen you might try using two dents right next to each other so there isn't too much wear on the warp. It is simple a matter of threading one or two dents, leaving a number of dents empty so a one inch space is created, and then slewing another group of six threads. This is the core or center of the finished chenille yarn.

If you are using a rigid heddle frame loom you will need to use two heddles. I have used two ten dent heddles but I think it isn't necessary that they both be the same. The back heddle, placed nearest the warp beam creates the shed. First thread three holes and three slots and then skip three holes and three slots; continue this pattern across the entire heddle. Then take the second heddle, line it up with the first, and take all six threads from one group (threaded three holes, three slots) and put them through one slot which is the center of the group. This heddle is used as the beater. If the tension is correct it does not interfere with the shed created by the back heddle. Treat the group of six threads as one unit while tying it onto the cloth beam. From this point on the process is the same whether weaving on a floor loom or rigid heddle frame loom.

I have found it helpful to place a guide thread on the outer edges of the warp which is not threaded through a heddle but is drawn through the reed. It is best to place this an inch or an inch and a half away from your first and last group of threads. It will draw in to create the half inch needed for the balanced chenille thread of these groups. The guide thread not only helps to keep even selvages, but it is of much assistance when cutting the loops. Periodically you must tie a slip knot in the guide thread because there is no take-up, as there is with the warp which is being woven.

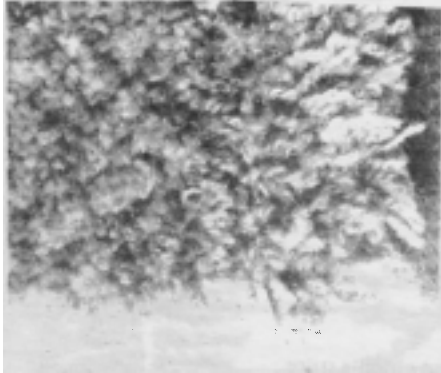
Almost any yarn or combination of yarns is satisfactory. Traditionally a woolen or worsted filling has been used, but I have seen all manner of fibers mixed without ill effect. My advice in relation to this would be to either evenly mix various fibers or consciously space groups of yarn in a prearranged pattern so that varieties in shrinkage will not play havoc with the finished product. The sample picture here was made with 7/2 worsted wool which I dyed five different shades. I wound two threads on one bobbin choosing the colors randomly and proceeded to weave with a tabby treadling using two shuttles which I alternated in a very haphazard manner. I did tend to beat the weft quite firmly but must confess that I didn't notate p.p.i.!

This is a fabulous project for leftover bits and pieces of yarn. If you can take a wild mixture, use as is, but if you are a bit more conservative, try over-dyeing the whole lot. In general a common household dye will work on most yarns. If you simply want the yarns toned down a bit try an over dye of grey--but don't get me off on the subject of dyeing! I do suggest though, that one dye the yarns before weaving rather than after, because the chenille does have a tendency toward felting as there are so many exposed ends.

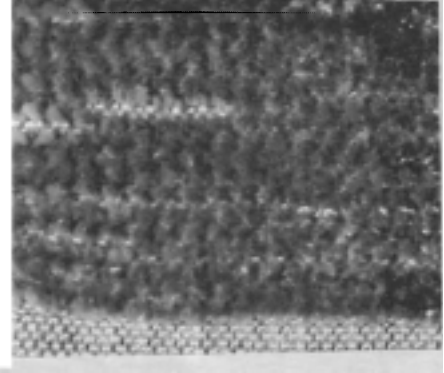
After you have woven off this warp, cut it off the loom leaving enough warp to tie knots at the ends of each group of six threads. This is to prevent it from unraveling! I've tried glue but in the long run I prefer the more tedious knots because the end isn't stiff.

Now the fun begins--you may cut the blanket material into strips. These strips are your chenille yarn. Cut straight down the space between the groups of warp threads. For a sample of the blanket material I simply used scissors, but for a six and a half by two and a half foot rug I tried electric scissors. This was an improvement but they did tend to get clogged and needed to be taken apart several times while cutting the 300 yards of required chenille (the blanket material was 10 yards by 30 inches). Another thing that helped me along with the cutting business was to leave some material and scissors by the phone and whenever it rang I cut strips of chenille!

When weaving this up into a reversible rug I used a 5/8 linen set at five ends per inch. On my chenille for this project which was made from thick and thin home spun which had been unevenly dyed, I used two shuttles. A rug ski shuttle with the chenille on it and a boat shuttle which held some 7/2 worsted which I used for spacing between the chenille shots. The rug took only 5 shots of chenille per inch with 3 shots of spacing between each of these. This spacing can vary from being non-existent, i.e., all the weft is chenille to six shots of plain weave between each chenille weft. The sample board at the Guild shows examples of woven chenille with two, four, and six shots of plain weave between with a small square of cut and looped chenille from the selvage. I like this idea but it is pretty impractical unless you weave very long thin warps of the blanket material.



dense chenille fabric



woven chenille with
tabby spacing

To create various patterns one can weave several different warps of blanket material and then alternate the various chenille yarns which have been created. The rug I made used this idea by weaving ikat yarns -- space dyed chenille which naturally created a pattern when woven. I enjoyed it but it took a great deal of mathematical computation. In the end the project was not too successful because I didn't take the time to view the weaving from a greater distance. I had carefully planned everything, and it seemed to be going well but I neglected to look at it from afar! Adjustments could have been easily made and disappointment avoided.

Another point of care should be taken in regard to measuring. Because these double faced rugs are so thick, it is difficult to measure properly. On my next rug I'm going to mark off yards on the warp and see if that helps.

I have read that in industry the chenille strips are passed through deep grooves in a heated roller which sets them in the shape of an "u." In this way all the pile is on one side. I tried directing all the pile in one direction with a thin metal strip while weaving but didn't have much success.

Most of my experimenting with chenille has been with rugs in mind, but it works nicely for trimming on clothing, drapes, etc. I wouldn't use it solidly for this, as the end product is rather heavy.


Happy Weaving and Experimenting,
Lotus Stack

References used:

Two Harness Textiles: The Loom-Controlled Weaves by Harriet Tidball, c 1967

The Textile Arts by Verla Birrell, c 1959

A Guide to Textiles by Mary Evans and Ellen B. McGowan, c 1939



ooh! ahhh!
um-hum!
umm...
YEAH!

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