

Tapestry

Simple laid-in tapestry for beginners
by LOU TATE

Definitely there is a trend in modern handloom weaving towards very creative forms of textiles. Hence, even beginning students want to do very individual weavings—usually some form of tapestry. The problem of the weaving teacher is to give beginning students a form of textile which will be simple enough in execution and which at the same time, will give full scope to the esthetic urge. Laid-in tapestry is a logical form. Here, the student has complete freedom of design; yet the weaving technique is sufficiently simple that even the inexperienced weaver can execute the design under supervision, and the experienced weaver can do it without assistance.

Taking as I do only a limited number of students (about half of whom live out-of-town and either have to take two lessons a day or have lessons at irregular intervals), I have to present in the short course all essentials of weaving in so concrete a form that the student can adapt weaving to her need—hobby, art, craft, research, business, occupational therapy, or teaching. For this reason, there is seldom time for more than one lesson on any one technique. Thus a lesson on laid-in tapestry forms the basis for all lettering, laid-in flower design, small figures, freehand tapestries, and pure tapestries. Sometimes there is time to have a later lesson on pure tapestry. The main point in this method of teaching is that the student herself anticipates the new work and does part of the reasoning involved. After all, if the student actually thinks, the work of the teacher is mainly guidance.

The work on the laid-in tapestry technique is usually taught between the fifth and twelfth lesson; consequently the weavings presented here are the work of very inexperienced weavers. As soon as a student asks to do a tapestry, that lesson is given. The subject of the tapestry and the amount of detail depend upon the character and the skill of the student. One of the last group of students remarked during her first lesson that she would never be happy till she started upon some form of tapestry. She is a brilliant person and has the



"Mountaineer-driving-a-razorback", woven by Elizabeth Bate Smith as her third piece of weaving.

fortune to have an artist husband to aid her in cartooning, so she was told that she could do a laid-in tapestry for her next lesson. However, she was restricted to a single figure and to five colors, and was warned about detail. So in the second week of her weaving course, Elizabeth Bate Smith wove as her third piece of weaving "Mountaineer-driving-a-razorback". (Illustration 2. Cartoon by Bob Smith; warp 28/2 cotton, 40 threads to the inch, grouped threading, figure laid-in with linen weaver.) The weaver worked from the wrong side so that the cartoon faced right; whereas the finished tapestry faces left.

Most of the students "pick-up" lettering. They see weavers signing their textiles, ask a few questions, and then try signing their own weavings. It is only when they have difficulty that lettering requires a lesson. Naturally, their first lettering is cruder than it would be were it supervised. However, the student is definitely benefited by accomplishing such details on her own initiative. Signatures—at first only initials and date, then name of pattern, name of weaver, and date—on early American patterns are usually woven with the right side up. However, on all tapestries, linens, towels, etc., the weavers work from the wrong side of the textile. After the first adjustment of lettering backwards and drawing all people left-handed, the weaver has control of the design and can obtain a smoother finish and better design.

Stress is placed upon originality of design. Students are encouraged to continue their laid-in tapestries by weaving freehand figures and flower designs. As they select their own subject matter, silhouette or outline designs of subjects pertinent to their daily life are often chosen. In contrast to the silhouette type "Mountaineer-driving-a-razorback" is the outline design of a house. The child who wove this laid-in tapestry used her home as the subject. As the house itself



Miss Jessie Lambert weaving laid-in tapestry figures.



Woven by Mary Anderson Courtenay on her 16th lesson.

centered on the century old ancestral doorway, the cartoon was drawn with emphasis on the doorway. Although I do not take children for weaving students, twelve year old Mary Anderson Courtenay wanted to weave so much that she came to her mother's lessons and soon was taking the lessons. She justified being made the exception to the rule. From her first lesson, she had no trouble reading early American patterns from the warp, grasped the principles of drafting rapidly, and soon was signing her weavings. Then on the sixteenth lesson for the family, she wove the little laid-in tapestry of her home. (Illustration 3. Cartoon made by reversing outlines of a photograph of her home; warp 20/2 cotton, 40 threads to the inch; 20/1 linen binder, linen weaver for laid-in threads; signed MAC 1938.) The simple outline work, she used as high as thirty laid-in threads at one time to fill in the pattern. She worked from the wrong side of the tapestry with the cartoon folded to show the unwoven part of the tapestry; she used loose threads rather than small bobbins to lay-in the pattern (Illustration 4.).

If there is any set pattern for this laid-in tapestry lesson, it is a mat with a flower design in one corner and a monogram or name in another corner so arranged that the weaver works on only one laid-in part at a time and yet so designed that the textile is harmonious. Typical of this designing is the child's place mat woven by Jane Hall on her eighth lesson. She adapted one of the clever duck designs of Julie Peterson for the lower right corner and wove the name of the child in the upper left. (Illustration 5. Cartoon drawn with duck in the lower left corner and the lettering reversed in the upper right; woven from the wrong side of course; 20/2 mercerized warp thirty thread to the inch; peach and wine color linen weaver for the pattern.) Variations of this type can include flower designs, little figures, silhouettes of pet animals, classical Greek key designs, etc., so arranged that the weaver does not use many bobbins at once.

Naturally these first little laid-in tapestries are only preliminary work and are never even minor masterpieces. As the weaver is an interpreter, she is permitted to work from an artist's cartoon or to adapt her own cartoon from another designer. Whenever possible, she should create her own de-

sign. Never should she bother with conventional little log cabins and other trite designs so often woven by the score or gross. To stress originality, students should try freehand laid-in tapestries of flowers, fish, ships, figures, etc. Freehand tapestry with the laid-in pattern over a binder thread which runs across the warp, is rapid in comparison to pure tapestry and gives the student mastery of any tapestry form—knowledge of the “give” of threads, the shrinkage allowances necessary, angles and curves, and the general “feel” of designing. After a few preliminary sketches, the student is turned loose to weave a small laid-in tapestry having one to three figures—depending upon the previous weaving experience and native ability. Pos-

sibly she gets suggestions from the similar weavings of others, but the actual figures are created as she works. This seems the most valuable weaving angle which my students have worked on. There is an unlimited range of subject matter. Starting with a central theme—usually on a luncheon set—each piece is woven different. By the time, the set is completed, the student has a rather good command of the technique and has probably developed an original style to her weaving. Such individuality as expressed in freehand and other original design is manifestly a criterion of handwoven textiles.

In continuing with the use of freehand laid-in tapestry to build up a distinctive style, I will tell of a development since we began weaving in January 1938 the capricious little figures dancing to the folk tunes of Guapo the fiddler. Starting a definite trend, the figures are never duplicated (Illustration 6. Guapo-the-fiddler; 45 inch cloth woven freehand, three figures woven from foot to head, six on the side, and three from head to foot; 20/2 mercerized cotton warp; 30 threads to the inch; 20/1 linen binder; linen weaver in five brilliant colors for laid-in pattern). A second weaver following this trend increased the exaggeration of movement till her figures are whimsically grotesque. A third weaver eliminated detail till the symbolical simplicity of her figures approaches the subtlety of oriental symbolism. As these represent seven months of development, it tends to show that the weaver with an essential knowledge of the laid-in tapestry can soon attain an individual style. Altho the essentials for laid-in tapestry and for pure tapestry are taught in one lesson covering bare essentials, it must be remembered that complete mastery requires deep application.

As much of the laid-in tapestry weaving at the loomroom is decidedly experimental and as the number of weavers is restricted, I would like to get comments from experienced weavers on this form of textile, and to get the reaction of beginning weavers who may work from suggestions in this article. I am especially interested in knowing the worth of laid-in tapestries as a training field for finer tapestries, the value of freehand laid-in tapestry, the method of aiding students without art training and without a flair for design



Child's place mat woven by Jane Hall on her eighth lesson.



Weaver illustrating laid-in tapestry technique.

to make her cartoons, and the value of this trend to American development in handwoven textiles.

The following outline may be of help to beginning weavers in laid-in tapestries. Similar material is discussed at the loomroom before the student begins her first laid-in design. The initiative of the student is depended upon to carry the work into finer laid-in tapestries, freehand luncheon sets, and pure tapestry weaving.

Subject matter—a single silhouette figure, semi-silhouette, outline, flower, etc.—make it original.

later use groups of figures, airplane, skyline, ships in full sail, sprays of flowers, horses, symbolic designs, etc.



"Guapo—the fiddler"

Cartoon—use draft paper 10,13,20 blocks to the inch; if you use 20 paper for a 40 count warp, the lines will make one shed and the spaces will make the second shed.

draw your cartoon in reverse as you will weave from wrong side. Use carbon paper to reverse your drawing if necessary, use a photograph as basis if you are shy art training practice sketching cartoons.

Warp—use the plain weave warp now on your loom or 20/2, 16/2 mer., 20/2, 28/2. 24/3 cotton, 20/4 silk, 18/2, 40/3 linen for warps; experiment to find your preference.

warp 30 to 45 thread to the inch or coarser for laid-in tapestry; 20 to 30 or coarser for pure tapestry.

Binder—about the size of the warp; run across as usual, plain weave, add larger pattern thread on same shed.

a neutral tone in linen, silk, fine wool, etc., is best.

Pattern—yarn two or three times as heavy as binder; linen weaver, crewel wool, silk and wool, heavy silk, etc.

limit colors to four or five of same intensity at first; add more colors and shades as you add detail to your cartoons; use various types of yarn for effects.

for small tapestries use paper bobbins, small wood tapestry shuttles, or simply short strands of yarn.

make ample shrinkage allowance; for 30 count warp, usually 35 to 42 threads are needed to the shrunken inch.

beat evenly but not so hard as usually on plain weave as you have to allow for laid-in threads.

Don't be afraid to experiment; so far, no weaver starting a tapestry has failed to complete one that was good considering her weaving experience. If you think the student pieces illustrated here are good, you can do as well for they represent the work of beginners.