
MASTER WEAVER

BI - MONTHLY BULLETIN FOR HANDWEAVERS

Z - HANDICRAFTS - FULFORD - P. Q. - CANADA

September - October, 1965

Vol. XXVIII No. 83

TEXTILE SCULPTURE

Please forgive the levity in our treatment of this subject. If you bear with us, you will realize that the levity is only superficial.

We take an old picture frame, rather large one, or if none is available we make one by nailing together four pieces of lattice, or any wood about ½" by 1½". It must be strong but it does not need to be exactly rectangular. Any shape will do.

Then we wind around the longer side of the frame anything at all which could be used as a warp: copper wire, oat binder, string, silk ribbon - one of them or better all of them in the same project. Let's not worry about the "sett of warp". Again anything will do from two to ten ends per inch.

At this stage we can spray the whole thing, frame and warp, with fast drying lacquer. One can get aerosol bombs with a wide selection of colours in any auto-parts shop.

Then we go for a walk and collect all sorts of things: can openers, weeds (preferably dry), pine cones, old Christmas tree ornaments, broken China, dead leaves, small pieces of drift wood, and sea shells. No, we cannot include very perishable objects, neither very round ones, unless we are equipped to drill holes in them.

All those are "accents". The real weaving must be done with some sort of yarn, the way tapestry is woven. The "yarn" again can be anything if it is fairly narrow and long enough. It can be the yarn proper, but anything which looks like yarn will answer.

We open sheds with a picking stick, but we do not need to worry about getting real tabby or twill or anything. We just pick them at random. Parallel to the "ground" woven in more or less real

yarn we insert the accents: here a piece of twisted aluminum foil, there an acorn with the twig attached. Anything.

When we have finished that is filled the available space with colour and texture (particularly texture!), we have created a "Textile Sculpture". We may still improve it by spraying with clear varnish. At least it will make it waterproof.

All this has little to do with weaving, but since the phenomenon exists, and is being sometimes called "creative weaving" we must face it.

Granted that the freedom of expression is everybody's right. Granted that crafts are a field which offers many techniques of self-expression for both: artists and non-artists. Still...

Real freedom is a result of self-discipline. Nobody can be or feel free unless he mastered techniques of expressing himself. Speech is one and the most important example. To speak or to write one has to submit to thousands of often irrational rules. If he does not, he is classified sometimes as a surrealist, but more often as an idiot.

In arts and crafts which are means of non-intellectual, call it "emotional" expression, the technique is as important as in speech, mathematics, or electronics. If one refuses to learn the technique, and yet insists on playing with the medium, he is an interesting psychiatric case, if he is interesting at all.

We are only too familiar with pottery which looks like a product of an earthquake. We have metal sculpture done by welding junk. And we have also the textile sculpture.

But the uninhibited sculpture in stoneware or metal has at least the merit of being permanent. Good or bad it will last. The textile sculpture won't, unless we are very careful how we do it.

Here of course the question arises: why should it last? We have other forms of art which do not: fire-works, sand painting, conversation (it used to be an art), flower arrangement, love-making in certain civilisations, and even fighting.

Works of art do not need to last provided that they made an impression on a large audience at the time of creation, or because they have a deep meaning for the creators alone. They may also have a therapeutic value, as in depth psychology.

Now precisely what is the object of Textile Sculpture?

If it is Jungian, then it should be kept a secret between the patient and the doctor; it is of little value for anybody else. If it is of universal significance, it should have a large audience. But how can we get such an audience except by making the work more or less permanent? And in most cases it is not permanent.

The only alternative remains: the work is of deep emotional significance to the maker, but not on the unconscious level as in psycho-therapy. This is the only legitimate case. The creator just has to make this particularly risky experiment. He makes it for himself alone, and destroys it, if it does not solve his problem.

But then what is the difference between this type of textile sculpture and the normal experimenting in colour and texture which every weaver is or should be doing all the time? None, except that the author of the uninhibited sculpture is not a weaver, that he lacks the knowledge, the training, the discipline of weaving.

How much better it would be if the textile sculpture were made by qualified craftsmen! Unfortunately the "qualified craftsmen" are often frozen in tradition to the point that they do not dare to express themselves, and vice versa the "creative weavers" are only too willing, but they do not know how.

The impact of textile sculpture is good for the established authorities in handweaving because it upsets them emotionally; it makes them feel. On the other hand the impact of textile technology is good for the uninhibited "artists", because it makes them think. And both sides need badly these compensations for their shortcomings.

Supposing then that a real weaver is sick and tired of tradition, old and new, and wants to go on a binge. How should he go about it?

First of all he should make sure that he really wants it, and that at least vaguely he knows what he is after. There is nothing worse than "sophisticated" creativeness, sheer brain work performed without any emotional need, except pride.

The first time one attempts textile sculpture, the project should be made in two stages. We start with a sketch which may be just as described on the first page of this article, or perhaps made only on paper. It all depends on the personality of the author.

The sketch should be left alone for a while and then examined critically; changed, corrected, or destroyed. If it passed inspection with or without correction, the problem is to make the real thing, by eliminating technically weak points, and replacing wrong materials. This may take some time and study because the final version should look exactly like the original, yet it must be reasonably permanent. It should not decay, should not desintegrate when handled, and should resist legitimate cleaning.

Perishable materials must be either replaced or chemically treated. For instance no matter how tempting is boiled macaroni, it simply won't do as yarn. It could be "fixed" (see articles about "Unusual Yarns"), or replaced with plastic tubing. If the structure of the project is such that it involves large open areas, we must use proper techniques to make them strong (leno, net weaves). If some of the materials are too brittle, they can be made less so by chemical treatment before weaving (glycerine for dried plants). If we know in advance that there are colours which will fade, we can either fix them, or bleach and dye to the original shade.

The above examples are only to show some of the problems. There may be much more to it, and only a very experienced craftsman can attempt textile sculpture with any hope of success.

Incidentally most projects of this kind cannot be washed or dry-cleaned, but they must be at the very least dusted occasionally, and this is why we recommend spraying of the finished article with clear lacquer, or varnish, although this may darken the colours. A good compromise is to spray heavily the back with lacquer, and the front with a fixative (used in painting) which does not affect the colour. Unfortunately it may produce a frosty effect if there is any nap or pile. This can be gently removed with a soft brush before the fixative dries.

High quality textile sculpture may be much more than just a "conversation piece" hung above the open fire-place. When properly designed and executed it can be used for screens and partitions.

There is a special case of textile sculpture where only real textiles and real ceramics are used. We shall discuss this subject in the nearest future.
