

Luther Hooper

In the period from 1910 to 1932, Luther Hooper wrote seven books related to handweaving. Despite the passage of time since these books were written, they still are praised for the insights they offer.

This brief autobiography, written shortly before his death, tells much about the man and his work

Short Autobiography

I was born at Upper Tulse Hill, Brixton, on 4 April 1849. My father was manager of a drapery business at Highgate and my mother was the daughter of James Webb, builder, of Long Melford in Suffolk.

In 1855 the family, consisting of father, mother and two boys, of which I was the younger, removed to Finsbury Pavement, Moorgate Street, City. Here I remained at home until my marriage in 1872. I was educated at private schools, one at Stoke Newington and another in High Street, Hoxton. At the age of fourteen I was taken from school and a situation as office-boy was found for me with a stockbroker in Cornhill. During the time I was thus engaged, about two years, I developed some skill in ornamental writing and illuminating and was rather petted by some of the Stock Exchange members and was introduced by one of them to Mr Henry Shaw, well known as an antiquary and an authority on old manuscripts. His office was in Southampton Row, Bloomsbury. Mr Shaw offered to take me into his office as a pupil to learn illuminating by assisting an artist whom he employed to copy ancient illuminated books, etc. I paid no premium for this privilege, nor of course received any wages; I was allowed however to work at home at designing and drawing on wood for the wood engravers, my chief customer being Mr Joseph Swaine of Bouverie Street, Fleet Street—a noted engraver.

I remained with Mr Shaw about two years and then, answering an advertisement for a designer and obtaining an interview with the advertiser, who was a traveller for a French paper-hanging firm and also carried designs with him for sale to English paper stainers, succeeded in pleasing him and, as he found my designs saleable, our connection lasted for some years.

Thus I added wallpaper designing to my work for the engravers. Also during that period I began the practice of watercolour painting and exhibited pictures, and occasionally sold them, at the Old Dudley Gallery in Piccadilly.

I reckoned myself fairly successful in these occupations and in September 1872 felt that my prospects were such as to warrant my marriage with a young lady I had known for some years whose family were connected with the silk-weaving industry of Spitalfields.

Soon after my marriage I made an agreement with a wallpaper firm in London, Messrs Carlisle and Clegg, to make designs of wallpapers exclusively for them. I undertook to produce three designs a week, working at home in my own time. This agreement ran on for seventeen years and was terminated only by the death of the two partners and the absorption of the business by a combine formed by several London and Lancashire firms.

For about three years after my marriage I remained in London, but finding I could work better in the country I removed to Bentley, near Ipswich, where I remained until 1901.

About 1890 I began to study the history, principles and technique of weaving and assisted in the formation and development of a handloom silk-weaving firm in Ipswich, where I thoroughly mastered the techniques of weaving rich silk damasks, brocatelles, velvets, etc. and the preparation of designs for the loom. This study of the craft has enabled me to be of some use to the Art and Craft movement, in which I became interested about that time.

In 1901 I returned to London in order to design for and superintend a small tapestry-weaving industry at Bushey, a branch of weaving I had not hitherto studied: here I remained for rather more than a year and then removed to Haslemere, where there was a group of kindred

craftsmen, and set up a few looms assisted by my son and three skilled weavers who had been with me at Ipswich.

In 1910 I left Haslemere, my son having married and removed to a distance and, taking a studio in the Grosvenor Road, Westminster, began the part of my life for which all the earlier portion seems to have been a preparation. Here I wrote my most important and successful book, *Handloom Weaving, Plain and Ornamental*: it was one of the well-known 'Arts and Crafts' series of technical handbooks edited by Professor Lethaby and published by the late John Hogg of Pater-noster Row in 1911. *Silk, Weaving for Beginners, Weaving with Small Appliances, Books I, II and III*, intended for use in schools, occasional articles in magazines, etc., all followed in due course.

Lecturing for the Royal Society of Arts, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Ropemaker Street Technical College and various Arts and Crafts and other Societies, as well as for the London County Council, particularly in the Central School of Arts and Crafts, Southampton Row, was carried on at the same time as my literary work.

During the war for three years at the Central School I lectured on textile subjects twice a week to about a hundred drapers' assistants, who attended from various leading drapery firms, and afterwards for two years I taught tapestry and other kinds of weaving to a class of disabled men as well as textile students of the Central School.

In 1923 I had to retire from work for the L.C.C., having exceeded the regulation age limit by nine years.

I am now in my seventy-eighth year and am still teaching weaving to private pupils and writing books on textile subjects in my studio at Hammersmith.

— Luther Hooper

The comments of Dorothy Wilkinson, one of Luther's students, fills out the picture of the man. Her article, "A Student's Appreciation of Luther Hooper", appeared in June 1960 issue of the *Quarterly Journal of the Guilds of Weavers, Spinners, and Dyers*:

To be a good teacher one must remain always a good student and though Luther Hooper may never have expressed this idea to me, he had that spirit behind his teaching. In all my studies with him, though I felt his profound and great knowledge, I had the ease and happiness of co-operative exploration and of being able to ask without restraint questions which when the answer was supplied, turned out to be so obvious that they need not have been asked, but he had the knack of not making you feel a stupid fool!

I first met him when he came to my home in Holland Park, where I was struggling to weave on warps made by the very primitive Greek peasant method. I was introduced to him by the then Curator of the Textile Department at the Victoria & Albert Museum, Mr Kendrick, and I felt considerably awed at the thought of showing to such an authority of really good handweaving as Luther Hooper, what I had by then begun to realise was nothing less than chaos.

He came, and though he expressed in very strong terms his disapproval of what I was doing, he gave me, my sister and my then small staff of weavers, great hope of improvement if we adopted the Spitalfields techniques. This was the beginning of intermittent, though later fairly constant studies with him, and a friendship which lasted till his death in 1932. He was a very true and versatile artist. He started his artistic career as a wallpaper designer, and his designs became recognised by the silk manufacturers in East Anglia, which led to his study of textiles. He was also a very cultured musician, and played the violin, if not with technical ability, at any rate with great taste and understanding, and my sister (herself a violinist) and I as pianist spent many happy hours playing Corelli double violin and piano sonatas which Luther Hooper had copied out most beautifully from unpublished manuscripts in the British Museum. His watercolour paintings of East Anglia and Sussex river landscapes are charming, and pastels and tempera were very favourite mediums of his. He had a picture in his studio which he had painted from the window of a flat which he occupied for a short time on Upper Mall, Hammersmith, of the Thames at night through the bare branches of an

old tree, which I always enjoyed and admired. He used to say I did not know my London and that he would take me to those parts and along Chiswick Mall some day to improve my education. That walk never came off, but he had at least excited my interest in that part of London's river, and since then I have lived for nineteen years just where we were to have taken that walk together! The days I spent at his studio in Goldhawk Road, Hammersmith, were very happy ones and he collected round himself many weavers—chiefly those interested in the revival of draw-loom weaving, and of course, tapestry, in which he excelled. It was lucky for me that when he gave up teaching at the Central School and left his home near Bloomsbury, he decided to settle in Hammersmith, as it was no distance for me to come for my lessons, which he was kind enough to allow me to take at odd times, wherever I could get away from my little industry that had now been established in Kensington. The house in Goldhawk Road was of the Regency period, and was big enough for Hooper to let off rooms, one of which Aristide Messinesi lived in for about four years, where he had his looms, and I remember particularly the first big rug loom that was built for him under Hooper's direction, by Waldo Lanchester whose workshop was at the bottom of the long garden behind the house. The workshop was connected with the studio by a rickety wire running along the garden wall, at the end of which there was hanging one of those bells which were to be found in the kitchen quarters of all sizeable houses of that period. When Hooper pulled the wire, the bell rang and Waldo's head, which at that time was covered with a thick growth of curly hair, popped out and hands were waved and signals given of what he was required to bring to the studio.

Hooper must have been about 73 when I first knew him, and he was still agile and very erect. He was tall, and had a neatly clipped grey beard—in the studio he wore a brightish blue smock and always a little black skull-cap. On some people this clothing might have seemed posey, but not on him, in any way. He just wore a smock in the way that a joiner would put on his apron, or a mechanic his jeans. There was nothing of a pose about Hooper—he was just a keen, sincere and deeply interested artist-craftsman, who was so absorbed in his work that his own skill in it became a dedication to its successful achievement. Being a musician he saw, as I do, the great affinity between music and weaving and we had many interesting talks on the subject.

I remember so well the delight that I felt when he suggested that not only should he teach me the elements of draw-loom weaving, but that I should actually build all the monture with him. Waldo soon set to work on all the necessary joinery for the shaft-box Comberboard and Simple which was to be mounted on one of my old Greek fourposter looms. At that time Messinesi was building a very elaborate draw-loom. I have always thought that it was for a point repeat over the whole width of 27 in., but recently Messinesi has told me that it was not so elaborate. Anyhow, I do know that it was a very big achievement and for many months whenever I went for my lessons to Goldhawk Road, I found either Hooper or Messinesi up on a stepladder, tying countless cords of the monture.

Hooper was, of course, writing at that time his book *The New Draw-Loom* and he often said he would not live long enough to finish it. But it was finished about three months before his death though sad to say he never saw it in print.

About two years before his death he started the little Guild of Draw-Loom Weavers, as there were by then quite a few weavers who had been inspired by him to study this ancient technique and many had their own draw-looms of varying sizes and capacity. Though draw-loom weaving became his great interest at this time it must not be forgotten that he was a very skilled silk weaver, and also tapestry weaver, and I know he would be very shocked if he were alive now at the great slight to British craftsmen which has been dealt by the Coventry Cathedral Committee in employing French tapestry weavers for the Sutherland design. It was a great grief to me that I had only just begun a course of tapestry weaving with him when he died, and he had kindly arranged that the loom which we had set up together for my first panel should be in the studio for me to work on whenever I could get an hour or two to get down to Hammersmith. All who were constantly at the studio will remember a student, Mrs Anderson, who came up every week from Hertfordshire to weave on a panel representing the Noah's Ark and the animals entering it. Hooper nicknamed her 'The Constant Nymph' as she never missed her lesson if she could possibly help it. I can see him now sketching in on to the warp threads a small bird or animal for her to work into the design which was left very much to be built up by him as it progressed. I never heard whether it was ever completed.

He frequently came up to Kensington to help me make alterations to the looms which were still then only in our small establishment at 2a Bedford Gardens, and I shall always regard him as

the very true guide, philosopher and friend of my weaving career. If I can even in a small measure instil into my own students a little of the great benefit that his teaching has been to me, I shall be happy to feel I have taken some part, though just so small a part, in perpetuating the memory of this very great exponent and teacher of hand-loom weaving.

Books

Here, in chronological order, is a listing of Luther Hooper's books:

Hand-Loom Weaving Plain & Ornamental, 1910, London: John Hogg, 342 pages.

Silk: Its Production and Manufacture, 1911, London and New York: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, 126 pages.

Weaving for Beginners with Plain Directions for Making a Hand Loom, Mounting it and Starting the Work, 1919, London and New York: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, 114 pages.

Weaving with Small Appliances: Book I, The Weaving Board, 1922, London and New York, Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, 82 pages.

Weaving with Small Appliances: Book II, Tablet Weaving, 1923, London and New York, Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, 78 pages.

Weaving with Small Appliances: Book III, Table Loom Weaving, 1925, London and New York, Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, 84 pages.

The New Draw-loom: Its Construction and Operation Described for the Use of Handicraft Pattern Weavers, 1932, London and New York, Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, 219 pages.

Hooper's first three books have appeared in several editions and have been reprinted.

Silk: Its Production and Manufacture, which incidently contains a significant amount of material on weaving, was translated into the Chinese:

Can si gai lun, Qian, Jian and Hou, Shaoqui, translators, 1924, Shanghai: Shang we yin sahu kaun, 122 pages.

Address to the Royal Society of Arts

In 1912, only two years after the publication of his first book, Hooper presented a series of invited lectures to the Royal Society of Arts on the subject "The Loom and Spindle: Past Present and Future".

These lectures were reprinted in the *Smithsonian Institution Annual Report for 1914*, pp. 629-678.

Illustrations

As his autobiography indicates, Luther Hooper's early work included illustration. Many of the illustrations in his book were drawn by him in a easily recognizable style. See the examples in the appendix. Most of his illustrations carry his monogram:



He also is credited with the following published illustrations:

Studies in Westminster Abbey, sketched and drawn on stone, 1867.

Words of Our Lord, sixteen cards from designs, 1969.

Victoria and Albert Museum Holding

The National Art Library of the Victoria and Albert Museum holds the following item:

Luther Hooper: *Album of photographs, sketches, excerpts and proofs, mainly concerned with textile manufacture and pattern design, botanical illustration and Romanesque art, including some of Luther Hooper's own sketches and designs.*

Looms

Luther Hooper designed many improvements to looms and related equipment. His draw loom is particularly notable. It is interesting that he does not mention his work in this area in his autobiography.

His looms were sold commercially, as evidenced by advertisements, which appeared, among other advertisements, in the backs of his books. Here is an example:

The
HAMPSHIRE HOUSE
WORKSHOPS (Jordans Village
Industries, Ltd.)

□ □ □ □

The Hooper Looms & Accessories

ANY PATTERN MADE TO ORDER

Let us quote for your requirements

6 Upper Mall, Hammersmith, W.6

Availability of Hooper's Published Works

All of Luther Hooper's published works, except for the Chinese translation of *Silk*, are offered for sale from time to time through on-line used book dealers.

Hand-Loom Weaving can be found in its original edition for \$50 to \$100 depending on condition and the dealer. Later editions and recent reprints are considerably cheaper.

Silk is harder to find and has been offered for prices ranging from \$35 to \$100.

Weaving for Beginners has been offered recently at prices ranging from \$10 to \$35.

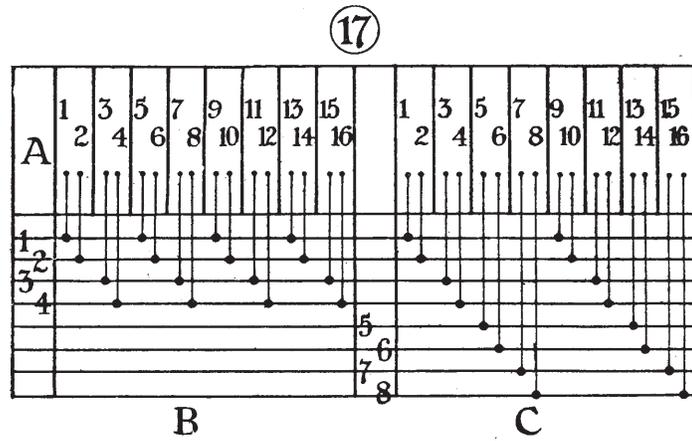
The *Weaving with Small Appliances* books are available separately and as a set. The individual books sell for \$35 to \$45. A set recently has been offered for \$125.

The most elusive of Hooper's books is *Draw-Loom*. In recent years, only one copy, in not the best of condition, has been offered at a price of \$150. Beware of a facsimile, taken from microfilm: The quality of the illustrations is very poor and, of course, the color is lost.

The 1914 *Smithsonian Annual Report* is available in the \$50 range.

All of his published works, with the exception of the Chinese translation of *Silk*, can be obtained through Interlibrary Loan. They also are available from Complex Weavers Lending Library and on the Web: <http://www.cs.arizona.edu/patterns/weaving/weavedocs.html>.

Examples of Illustrations in Luther Hooper's Books



From *Table Loom Weaving*

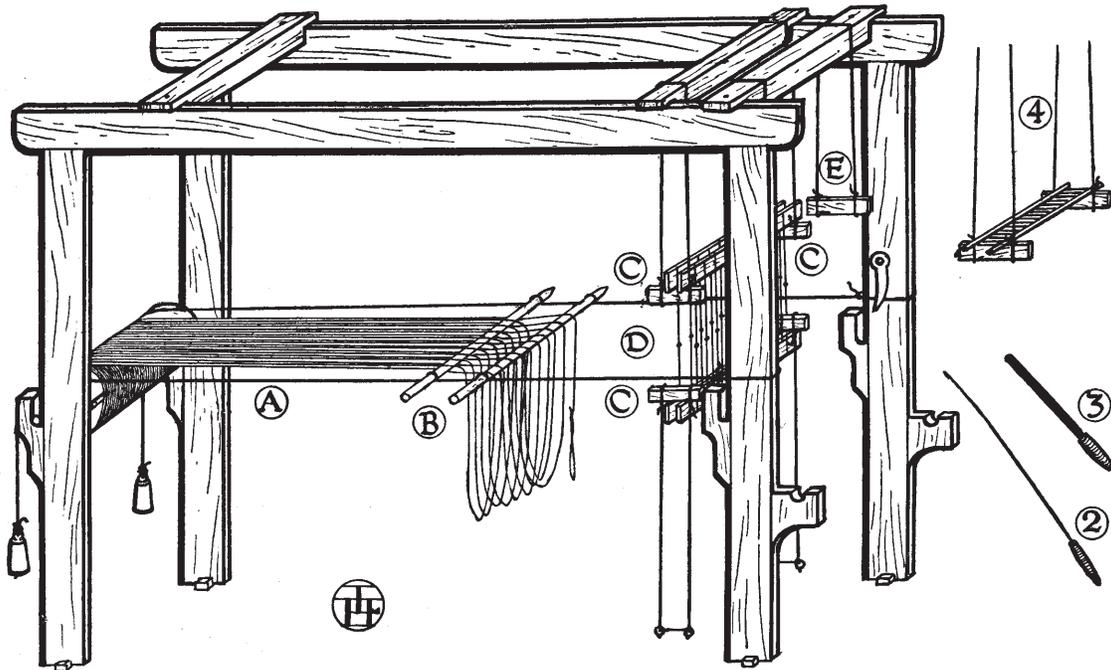
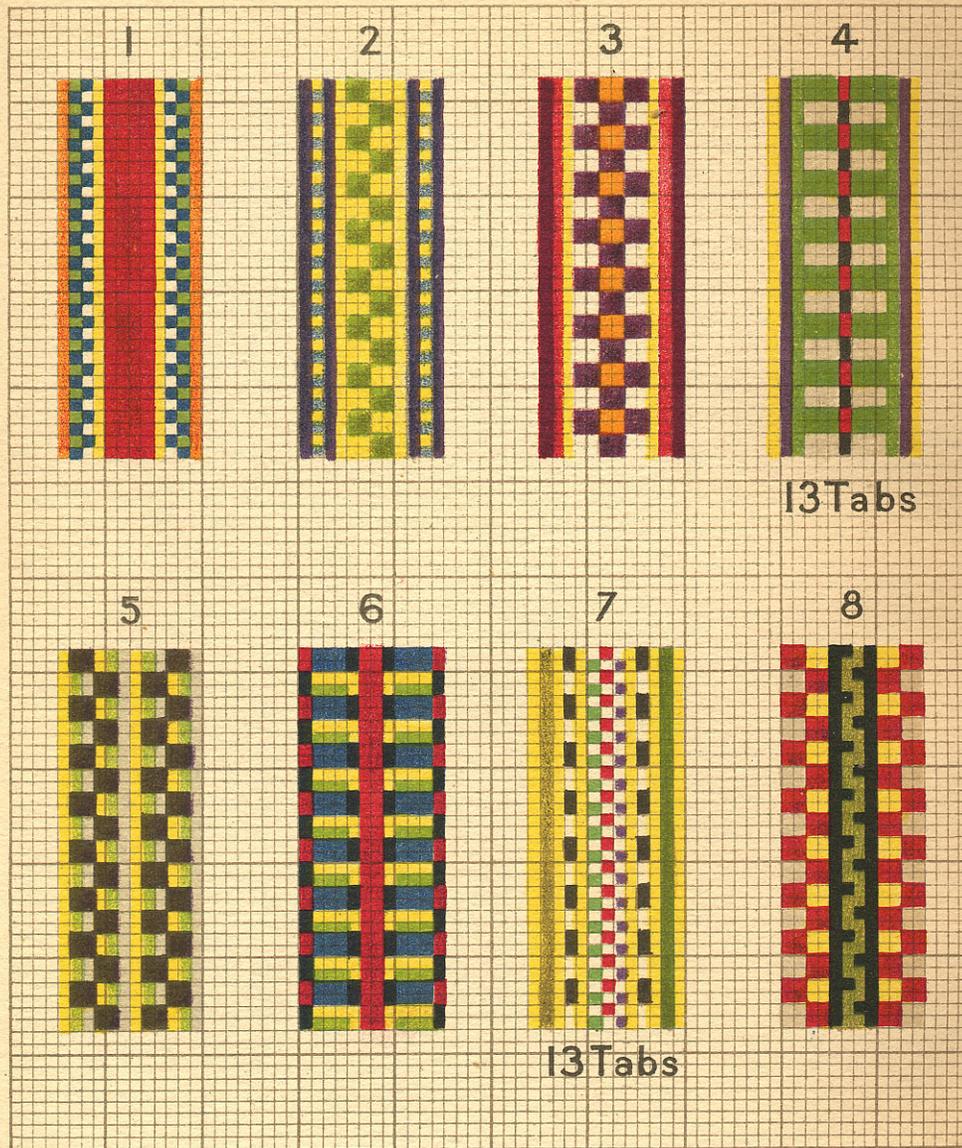


FIG. 32. LOOM PREPARED FOR ENTERING.

From *Weaving for Beginners*



From Tablet Loom Weaving