CONCEPTUAL CRAFT:

by April Kingsley

Fiber: Five Decades From the Permanent Collection of the American Craft Museum, a survey of the fiber movement from the 1950s to the present.

The use of tapestry as an artistic and functional medium has had a varying importance in relation to other historical developments in art and technology. In Europe, Medieval tapestries told stories in attractive, two-dimensional depictions and also served to help keep castle rooms warm. The popularity of tapestry weaving declined during the Renaissance, as three-dimensional picturing was more effectively executed in painting and as more efficient methods of heating interior spaces were developed. In the twentieth century pictorial tapestry was resurrected as a useful medium for the reproduction of modern paintings, but weavers were not satisfied to put their talents to use for such secondary purposes for long. On-loom structural weaving, in which the fibers began to hold visual and textural interest in themselves, gave way in the 1950s to off-loom structures that were woven or interlaced in three dimensions. During the next two decades many huge wall-, ceiling-, or floor-supported abstract fiber sculptures with no visible ties to the tapestry tradition were created. More recently, this three-dimensional development within the fiber movement has found both inspiration from and expression in basketry, vessel forms, and the human figure. The works of Norma Minkowitz, Jane Sauer, Ferne Jacobs, and Dawn MacNutt exemplify this tendency. But another concurrent development is the focus of this article, a startling return to the loom, to flatness, and to the pictorial—in short, to the tradition historically associated with tapestry, but also recently expressed with the use of other weaving techniques.

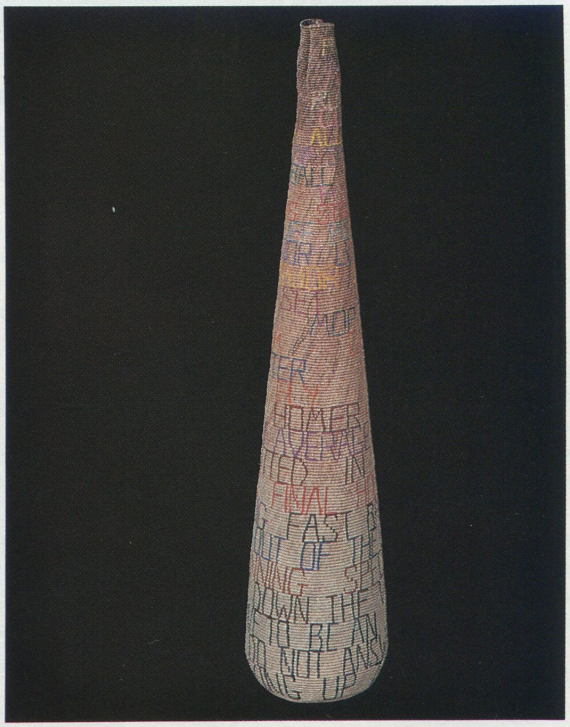
The new pictorial wall hanging is no simple thing. It may combine outlined form and flat patterning with deep spatial projection and illusionism. It may be single, double, or triple woven, of layers which may have been dyed or painted, printed, photographed, or Xerographed before, during, or after weaving. It may also be subjected to mashing, fusing, shredding, stuffing, and reassembly at any point in the process. The final result may be a weaving which looks like a painting, a painted weaving, or a picture of a fabric. Call it conceptual fusion or confusion, the cross-processing practiced by contemporary weavers defies categorization and is expressive of the densely intermeshed texture of contemporary life.

Complexity is the keynote of even the simplest of the new weavings. Intricate dyeing techniques are largely responsible for this, but advancements in loom technology have also played an important role. James Bassler uses ikat and batik dyed patterns precisely registered with the weave pattern of his slit tapestry-woven tapes, which he then joins with weft bundles. The results seem simple until one tries to figure out how he accomplished them. The kind of warp distortion he achieved in *Wedge Weave V*, 1983, was inspired by Native American chief blankets; his recent, politically charged tapestry weavings are even more complex in their weaving and dyeing techniques, as well as in concept.

The recent works of Theodore Hallman, whose conceptual craft originated in inquiries into other cultures and ideas in the 1970s, involve horizontal registers of dyed, twill woven cotton intersecting with vertical twill bands and single element looping. The tapes are invested with words inspired by his experiences of Native American

CONTEMPORARY WEAVING

Lia Cook, Crazy Quilt: Royal Remnants III, 1988. Abaca, rayon, acrylics, painted, woven, pressed, 63 by 54 inches. Collection of the American Craft Museum, New York.

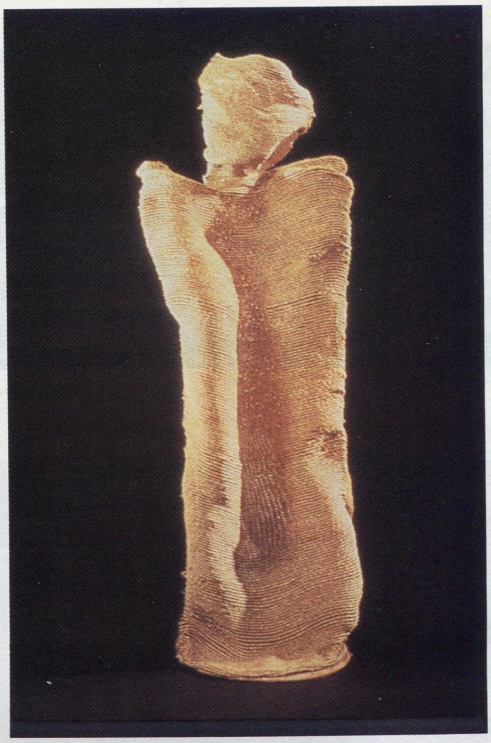


Jane Sauer, It's All in the Game, 1990. Waxed linen, linen knotted, 25.5 by 5.5 by 5.5 inches. Collection of the American Craft Museum, New York. Gift of Carolyn B. Sauer.

culture in the Southwest during a 1992 sabbatical in Santa Fe. *Spiral*, 1994, employs the ubiquitous spiral shape of the petroglyphs found in the area. He sees this ancient symbol as a metaphor for the merging of Native and Euro-American cultures, of horizontal and vertical, yin and yang.

Glen Kaufman's time, technique, and inspiration are divided between America and Japan where he spends half the year. His explorations into Jacquard woven silk were undertaken with a team of Japanese weaving experts. Like Bassler and Hallman, Kaufman works with and within a grid which expresses the horizontal/vertical axes of the loom and fabric. He further expresses that grid as a window through which an illusion of nature or architecture is viewed. The extremely high-tech surfacing processes he uses to affix metals and photographic imagery to his threads, and the exquisitely dense weaving of those fine silk threads—138 per warp inch in *Golden Tree/Kamigyo-Ku I*, 1986—on a miniature scale, is as complex as the layering of meaning and of the visual play of illusory and

Norma Minkowitz, Pontoon Bridge, 1987. Fiber acrylics, paint pencil shellac. Crocheted, painted; 8 by 12.5 by 12.5 inches. Collection of the American Craft Museum, New York. Gift of the artist in memory of her mother, Fania Chigrinsky. Photographer Bobby Hansson.



Dawn MacNutt, Kindred Spirit, 1984. Seagrass, copper wire, steel. Woven, 60.75 by 22 by 17.5 inches. Collection of the American Craft Museum, New York. Gift of Jack Lenore Larsen.

real depth in his East/West imagery.

Tapestry techniques are used by Judith Poxon Fawkes to execute *Ariadne's Landing*, 1991. Using the traditional tapestry weaver's paper cartoons beneath the warp, she weaves elaborate spatial illusions suggesting aerial view photo-composites or computer generated axonometric perspectives of imaginary architecture.

Bhakti Ziek, Patricia Kinsella, Cynthia Schira, and Lia Cook all use computer driven Jacquard looms to produce multi-level physical, visual, and conceptual content. Bhakti Ziek directs the Jacquard Project at the Philadelphia College of Textiles and Science, where she wove her 1994 *Artist's Statement*, which in an extended text so eloquently tells not only the story of her life as a weaver but Everyweaver's story. After executing such a conceptually and technically complex work, she turns to the simplest of weaves on her eight harness home loom for relief.

Pat Kinsella hand picks her way across the surface of a work like *Obelisk*, 1992, as if in refutation of her sophisticated loom's perfection and precision. Cynthia Schira uses the computer driven loom to create light-filled landscape abstractions which she can alter at will during the process of weaving. The speed with which the computer can incorporate changes in even the most complex pre-set programs permits her an unprecedented, almost painterly, on-loom spontaneity, competing with and even surpassing the ability of pure painting to fuse image and support.

Lia Cook multiplies both process and imaging in inextricably complex matrices. She physically beats her imagery into the surface of her weave, prints photographic images of fabric onto it (like the picture of a rumpled quilt in *Crazy Quilt*), and applies paints and dyes before and after weaving. Cloth is both her subject and her object. She heightens the tactility of the fabric to impress the viewer with the human touch factor, a primal, pre-verbal sensation. Like other highly advanced artists working in the fiber medium, Cook uses the most complicated weaving technology to touch our most elemental emotions.

April Kingsley is a curator at the American Craft Museum in New York. She organized the exhibition, Fiber: Five Decades From the Permanent Collection of the American Craft Museum, *which is on view at the museum until June 25, 1995.*