

# notes of a pattern weaver

by Philis Alvic

In this article, I want to comment on the relationship of art and technique. But for you to properly evaluate my thoughts on the subject, I feel that you need additional information. First, it might be useful to know a little about my training as an artist; second, the development of my ideas of craftsmanship; and third, my stance on the art/craft controversy. All of these have helped to shape my opinions and bear directly on my views of art and technique.

I was brought up in Chicago, the eldest child in a working class family that believed in the American Dream. The strongest tenet of the Dream for my parents was that through education everything was possible. I reaped the benefits of this philosophy in many ways.

During my four years at a professional art school, in addition to learning about and producing art, I also formed ideas about artists. Although I am sure that the faculty never formally conferred, they nevertheless consistently presented the philosophy of an artist as a thinking, disciplined worker who is aware of the history of the field, and is a skilled practitioner.

Artists think about what they do. They are not arbitrary in their actions. Sometimes this thinking does not take place in words, but in the repositioning of visual elements. Artists are disciplined, in that they systematically work through ideas. They work on a regular schedule, and because they are self-directed, often work with great intensity.

Artists are acquainted with the history of art and learn from the way their predecessors tackled problems. They are also aware of their place in the sometimes disjointed stream of visual investigation. Artists are skilled

at controlling visual elements. As in other fields, this skill is acquired through study and practice and experimentation.

My ideas on the nature of crafts and craftsmanship developed from close contact with those engaged in producing items with their hands: my father, my weaving teacher and many people I have met in craft organizations and guilds. I will not try to sort out exact contributions or the confirmation of ideas by each of these sources, but will just relate general concepts I've formed from association with them.

In any craft, there is a close relationship between the materials, tools and the finished product. Because of the love and respect for the materials, there are certain ways that they should be used. In crafts, tools take on great importance, because without their special properties the item could not be produced. Within each craft area, there are standards of craftsmanship independent of art standards by which an item can be judged. Skill in craft is easily recognized by others engaged in that craft and can be quantified much more easily than standards in art.

I had hoped to avoid the art/craft controversy, but I feel that I must make you aware of certain positions that I have developed in relation to the question. Even though I have sat through many panels at craft conferences devoted to analyzing the problem, I really don't see the conflict between art and craft. That is not to deny that the painting and sculpture end of my school had a status that the craft end didn't. Nor does it imply that I am not aware of the floor plan of major art museums with regard to the placing of fine and decorative arts. I have noticed, however, that it is always people in-

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involved in crafts who discuss the separation of art and craft — not painters and sculptors. I feel that emphasis on the division as a controversy is a cry from those of us at the lower end of the art totem pole to have our work taken as seriously as we ourselves take it.

There are many ways of looking at an item. Often, the category in which an object is placed determines the standard by which it will be evaluated. If the way an item is made and its use are used to categorize it, then the idea of “crafts” becomes important. On the other hand, if all items were judged primarily on visual standards, there would be no art/craft controversy. Although somewhat subject to fashion, there are some enduring visual elements that any object must have to qualify as art.

So when considering the relationship of technique to art, I carry with me the substantial baggage of view-



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ing myself both as an artist and as a weaver. These are not two distinct parts of me, but interrelated aspects, each important and contributing to one another.

Several years ago, I discovered a book by Lewis Mumford titled *Art and Technics*. One quote contained in the book had special meaning for me: "Through acquiring skill in technics, he (the craftsman) became licensed, as it were, to practice art. At that stage, the machine itself makes a contribution to creative release."

Although I was first interested in art, I have found that skill in manipulating the loom has given form to my vision. The vehicle of expression influences the product. By choosing to be a weaver, I have put certain limitations on the visual outcome. But through understanding yarn and yarn interlacement, the limitations become a path to a wide expanse of visual ideas which

can be explored. Control of my direction gives me more possibilities, but only if I possess the skill to make the loom a partner in my creative investigations. My particular vision could not be represented in any other media than weaving.

During my formative years, I thought of myself as a painter, but I could not paint the designs in my hangings and achieve the same dynamics.

My method of working, in which I employ a long warp to produce several unique items, makes both artistic sense and craft sense. By working in a series, I can explore a visual idea through employing many variations. At my command are not only the overall design, but the elements of color, texture and pattern. By choosing to have some of these remain constant while I explore others, my understanding increases and, hopefully, the quality of the item, too. Often the work is interactive: the visual idea suggests techniques to represent it and the technique stimulates visual ideas.

The study of historical textiles and fabrics of other cultures suggests applications to my own work. Influences can make themselves felt in two ways. First, the design of items can stimulate visual ideas. Second, the technique can translate into my own design reference and point toward new variations. I borrow ideas, but do not directly appropriate them as my own. Therefore, I may learn from studying other work, but the application of the knowledge which I gain must be a function of my own time and culture.

Even though I use many complex techniques in my work, I do not want that aspect of the work to be obtrusive. Like a dancer who considers herself to be successful if

her performance appears easy, I want my product to appear effortless. Naturally, I expect other weavers, the insiders, to recognize my skill, but the average viewer should be able to get something out of a piece without specific technical knowledge.

Ben Shahn, in his book, *The Shape of Content*, refers to the artist as his own severest critic. I have two inner critics with which to contend. Because I have chosen to be both an artist and a weaver, I feel that I must meet standards of excellence for both fields. Yes, it would have been easier if I had chosen only one area. However, at this point, I could not imagine having chosen otherwise.

As an artist who is a weaver and as a weaver who is an artist, I have numerous elements with which I can work. In previous articles, I have commented on weave structure as it contributed to a finished item. After the major decisions have been made in setting up a warp on the loom, the three elements that can then be manipulated are color, texture and pattern. In my following articles, I will convey some of the problems which I have encountered in working with these elements and how I have resolved them. It is difficult to separate out part of any work, but by forcing myself to do that to share with you, I come to a finer understanding of what I am doing. By understanding more of how my work goes together, I can exercise more control and thus achieve a better product.

## Bibliography

- Mumford, Lewis. *Art and Technics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952).  
Shahn, Ben. *The Shape of Content* (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1957).