

A One-of-a-kind Garment in Beiderwand

by Philis Alvic



WHEN PEOPLE inquire about the price of one of my garments, I arrogantly reply "I'm the only one who can afford them." Now, this line usually gets a laugh, but I really mean it. The clothing I make is custom designed in every sense. I spend most of my time weaving large wall hangings, and the garments represent a diversion into other weaving concepts that I do just to please myself. Since I weave no more than one garment a year, all time and cost considerations are set aside. The sole guiding forces in the creation of a garment for myself are my ideas of elegance and convenience. I have expensive taste and I think I am worth the effort I put into one of these pieces. Whether or not anyone

else agrees with me is the doubt expressed in my quip about the price. I've chosen one outfit as an example and will enumerate the ways it has been uniquely designed for me by me.

This garment has been made with silk yarn, as is most of the clothing that I make for myself. There are several reasons for this. I like the response I get when I reply "silk" to the question "What is it made of?" Silk has an elegant connotation that other fibers do not carry. In the actual weaving, silk takes no more time than wool or cotton, but the resultant fabric is considered to be more precious. Besides the obvious snob appeal of silk, I like the physical properties. It washes beautifully, and retains bright col-

ors to look nice through much wear. It is an all weather fiber in looks and comfort. Silk is breathable and absorbent in the summer and warm in the winter when teamed with a turtleneck and other undergarments.

Many years ago it was impressed upon me that the shape of a garment carried a special message of its own apart from the fact that it was made from interesting fabric. Much of my early training in weaving centered on fabric design. I wove several lengths of yardage and my mother, a very careful professional seamstress, made them up into suits in the fashion of the time. They did not arouse the attention that I had hoped they would. Although very nicely done, these

suits did not impress people as unique items. Somehow, the desire to be noticed is defeated if one has to wear a sign around the neck stating "This garment is hand-woven." In my effort to impress people with my fabric design, I had overlooked the fact that my garments were first judged by the principles of fashion design whether or not I chose to acknowledge them. After analyzing the problem, I switched to designing costumes instead of clothing. With the general shape of the piece, I wanted to signal to the viewer that this was something special. There are limiting factors of my age and general body type that must be considered. In my quest to be noticed, I don't want to appear silly in an outfit that, while striking, is unsuitable. The skirt and top shown here nicely illustrate the principle of being dramatic while remembering the constraints imposed by my person. The simple shape is made from unconstructed rectangles, with the natural drape of the fabric conforming to the body. The top is one long rectangle with fringe left on either end. A small hole was cut for the head, and the sleeves were sewn on flat. The skirt is made from two rectangles sewn on the sides to the knee and gathered with elastic at the waist. This style is well suited to my figure while disguising the fact that my waistline disappeared with my fortieth birthday.

I have already hinted at the publicity value to me, as an artist, to be noticed in my own creations. To carry this

identification between me and my hangings closer, I adapt some of the major visual aspects of my larger pieces to my wearables. My long fascination with early American coverlets is indicated by the selection of design elements from them and then focusing on them in my work. In the example shown here, I selected one figure from a pattern by Jacob Angstadt and made it the major interest by repeating it in rows at the lower edge of the top and of the skirt. The beauty of being in complete charge of a project is that the fabric patterns can be placed in accordance with the shape of the garment, because of the control I have as weaver and as designer. The vertical stripes are used to emphasize the vertical over the horizontal thrust of the rows of flowers and also visually tie together the top and the skirt. There is no question that this material was woven specifically for this item. The unusual placement of the major figures in the fabric stresses the importance of the fabric in the overall concept of this garment.

One part of designing for myself that I especially love, is that I can indulge in my love of color. The red of the flower figures and the blues of the stripes were chosen to enhance those design elements as separate units. There is a subtle variation in the colors of the vertical stripe. The bright colors of the warp are made richer by slightly different shades within one color stripe. Even though there are bold colors, the garment is primarily the color of

the pattern weft which is composed of two threads: one black and one brown.

Not quite as apparent at first, but very important to the piece, is the choice of weave structure. This outfit was woven in Beiderwand. Aside from wanting to indicate my virtuosity as a weaver, this weave structure allowed the distinct color areas designated in the design. Other properties of Beiderwand suited the garment, too. The fabric had body without bulk. The short yarn floats created surface texture while not presenting a problem in wearability. The large double woven areas which might have caused difficulty in construction were so placed that there wasn't any problem.

In the end, I have a garment which is uniquely mine. The shape suited my shape underneath, and is very comfortable to wear. The fabric is dominant and obviously created for this garment. When I wear this outfit, I tell people a lot about myself before I open my mouth. Just as a costume in a play signals many things about the character to the audience, this garment alerts the viewer to major interests of mine. Because I am in complete control of the project, I can present myself in the way I want to be viewed.

Reference

Holroyd, Ruth N. and Ulrike Beck, *Jacob Angstadt Designs, Drawn from His Weavers Patron Book*, Pittsford, N.Y., Self-Published, 1976.