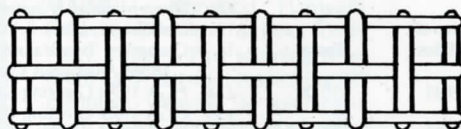


Notes of a Pattern Weaver



by
**Philis
Alvic**



The forced change in my working habits that occurs every year has prompted many summer projects that have ended in dismal failure because they did not allow for these two major limiting factors. For the summer of 1981, I chose to investigate miniature textiles because they would permit interruptions and not be physically strenuous. This project proved so successful that it consumed most of the following year.

I realized after I told a friend that I was doing miniatures and she replied that she did them too, that we were talking about different animals. What I call miniatures are actually very small wallhangings — not scaled replicas. They are small works of art that are intended to be evaluated as complete pieces in themselves.

By one of those happy accidents that are so important in any creative process, I chose to combine my first experimental warp with an investigation of a weave structure that was new to me. This warp in Tied Lithuanian was the perfect choice because it allowed for immediate success (*SS&D*, Spring 1982). I've never been one of those people who find a challenge in failure.

When something goes right, I can immediately see many possible ways to make it better, and am encouraged to experiment. This is somewhat contrary to the Protestant work ethic that puts great store in overcoming obstacles. In a

world so full of interesting things to do, it seems silly to waste time on difficult tasks. I've always felt that real achievement comes when I work hard at improving something that I have a feel for and that I like to do. Stated in a positive way, it is a theory of going with one's strengths.

My first warp was set up with the blocks arranged in a point progression with each block a slightly different shade of green. That allowed me seven blocks with which to construct symmetrical figures on my 16-harness loom. As I stated in the Winter 1981 issue of *SS&D*, I am far more adventurous designing on paper than I am sitting at the loom. So from the very beginning, I have worked out the designs for the miniatures on graph paper. I approached these small pieces in the same way that I think about my large hangings. I would try to do something different and build on what I had learned with each new piece.

Before this warp was finished, I had the opportunity to work for a week at the Appalachian Center for Crafts. I arrived for the week with two chained warps, ready to work. Everything was ideal but my weaving plans. Most of my large hangings are in Summer and Winter and I was planning to devote the week to using this structure in the small pieces. Nothing seemed to work right and fighting with unfamiliar equipment compounded the problems. But I had my previous success with the Tied Lithuanian warp under my belt, and I knew that I could overcome the many complications. A real breakthrough was achieved when I stopped trying to work with Summer and Winter. This weave structure did not scale

down well at all. In the large format, I was very fond of the interaction of warp and weft that produced small flecks of one within the other. This property was very distracting in small pieces. The type of end product I conceived required distinct figure and ground areas. I discarded one of the warps and threaded the other in Beiderwand. Things immediately began to go right. One of the pieces completed that week is shown in Photo A. All of my miniatures have been either in Beiderwand or Tied Lithuanian because these structures have strong positives and negatives.

After my initial slow start in the responsibility-free atmosphere of the center, I produced at least half a dozen pieces a day. With this concentrated work, I began to feel the control that can only come from experience. At the Appalachian Center, every afternoon I spent a couple of hours in the lounge planning the next day's activities. Weavers are planners and I, like most, want to know the direction in which I'm headed. I'd work up several designs and even try to have in mind suitable weft yarns. When I got home, a quiet time to design was no longer available.

With a large piece, careful planning is essential because of the amount of time and materials invested. But, with only a couple of hours and few cents in yarn, I could afford to take chances on the miniatures. I proved the old adage "nothing ventured, nothing gained" as I experimented with wild combinations of yarns and colors and the pieces became individually more interesting. Some days I felt more somber and would try for subtle variations in materials.

I concentrated on color: co-ordinated with the block (Photo B); random progression (Photo C); or different tie-threads (Photo D). As winter came, I gave up the security of symmetrical designs, and threaded each block separately.

Freedom is a rather scary thing. I usually start any project from the safest and most obvious position and progress very cautiously. I move into a new idea only when I feel I have exhausted the one on which I've been working. Sym-



Photo A. Beiderwand, 12-harness, 40 e.p.i., 7½" x 4¼".

metrical designs are easiest because of the built-in balance; half of the decisions are made in a mirror image. So it was a tremendous leap for me to give up the security of the symmetrical format and to move to independent blocks.

At first, I did symmetrical figures placed asymmetrically, but when I got used to the freedom, my designs moved from a figure with a background to figure-ground studies—where it is not easy to determine which is the figure and which is the background.

On long warps, I tended to work in series as one idea built on another. The results are exhaustive studies of design, color, and texture. Each warp had a personality and suggested types of design figures. I had expected to be influenced by the warp color in weft choices, but was surprised by the way the design ideas conformed in feeling to the warp. To date, I have produced about 150 miniatures; no two are identical. Occasionally, I will repeat a particularly successful design to see how it is influenced by a different color choice. There are also some recurring themes: shields, arrows, stars, plant motifs and checkerboards.

Treadling required considerable athletic skill. Each block was tied to a treadle, so it often required stepping on several treadles at one time or depressing one and sneaking my toe under another one.

During this time, I was very excited about my new adventure into miniatures and presented my friends with a stack of small pieces

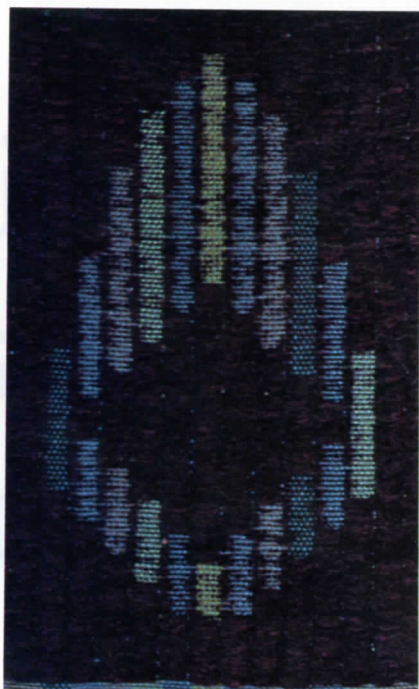


Photo B. Tied Lithuanian, 16-harness, 30 e.p.i., 8" x 5½".

to look through. As they were examining them, most commented that they liked the back as well as the front. I had planned to present them matted or mounted in a frame. But I agreed with my friends that the "wrong" side was often as interesting as the "right." I began to seek other ways to display the pieces. Finally, I found stand-up menu holders that held them so that both sides could be viewed. Because the works were held by the pressure of the two sides of plastic, no paper mount was needed. I also liked this presentation because my miniature was allowed to look like a piece of fabric, with two selvages and two raw edges.

The sizes and general format of all of my miniatures has remained constant, because what I am really interested in is the design and the color and yarn interactions. A simple rectangle stresses the importance of what is going on inside.

During the many presentations I have made to elementary school children, one of the questions that I can always count on being asked is "How long did it take you to learn to weave?" Since all children are counting the years they have left in the educational system, they are always shocked when I inform them that I'm still learning. My summer project was extended because it was so exciting to work

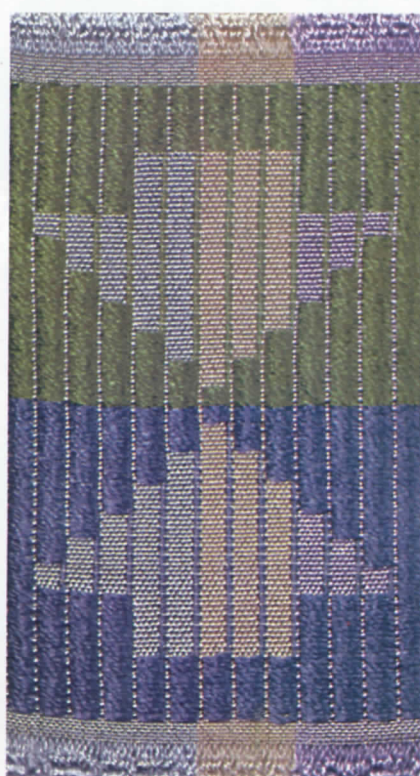


Photo C. Tied Lithuanian, 16-harness, 30 e.p.i., 6¾" x 4¼".

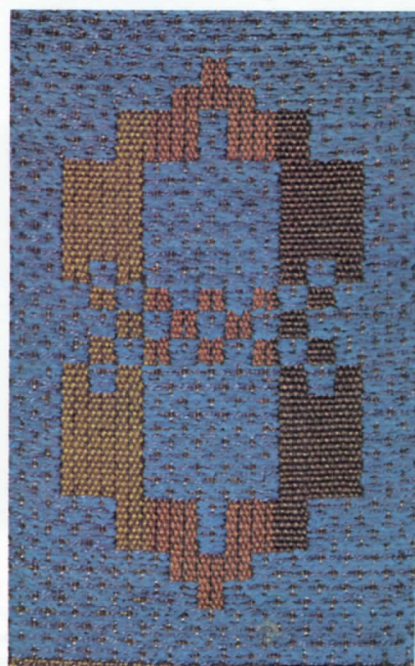


Photo D. Beiderwand, 16-harness, 25 e.p.i., 7½" x 4¾".

with something new. At the outset, I thought I would be working with the same ideas as in my large hangings, only smaller. But as I got into the work, I realized that wholly different principles governed these small pieces. The miniatures have an intimacy and jewel-like quality that I am just beginning to understand and exploit.

PHOTOS: GARY SCHROEDER