

BUILDING ON A TRADITION

by Philis Alvic

In this time of discovering one's roots, as a handweaver I certainly have a very rich heritage. In thousands of years of weaving, much knowledge has been accumulated. Sometimes contemporary weavers ignore this tradition for fear of being negatively influenced. I do not feel the need to negate the past in order to make a further contribution. I view myself as building onto that tradition.

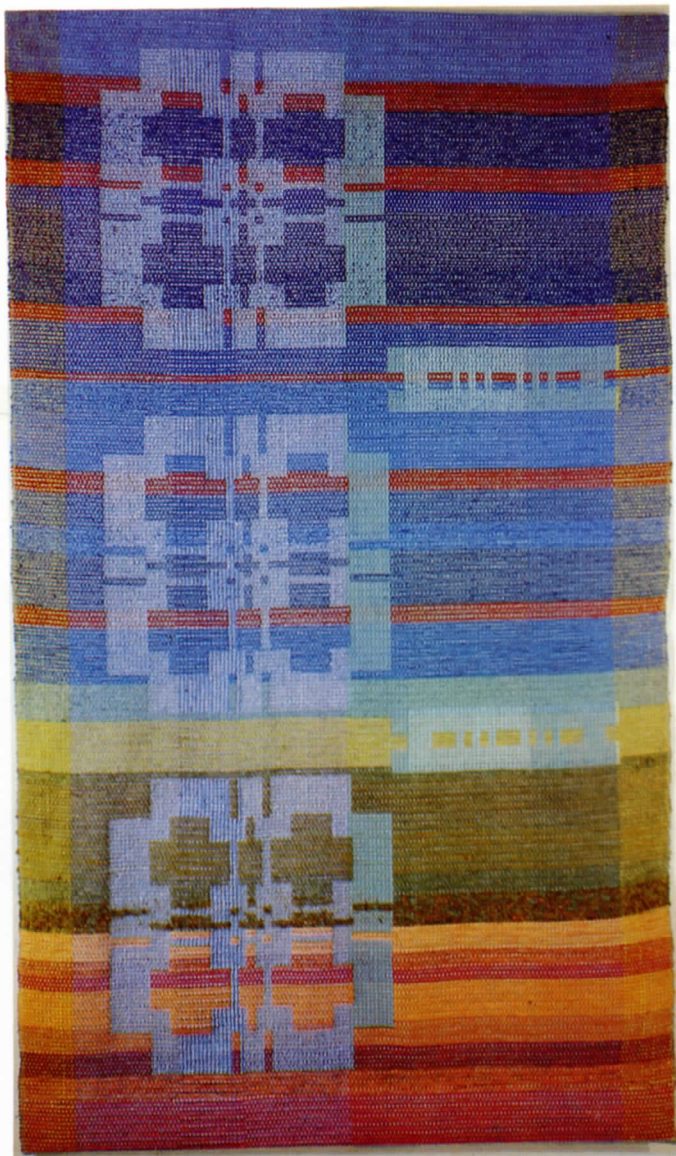
There is considerable difference between reproducing an item and being influenced by it. Reproduction requires patience and an eye for exactness of detail. Building on a tradition, on the other hand, is a creative endeavor. It requires a careful evaluation of the elements that comprise an historic item. After individual elements are isolated, then there are some complicated decisions to be made. In working with a tradition, the weaver has three choices: 1. accept it as it is; 2. discard it entirely; and 3. change it. Changing hopefully means getting better. Starting from a base of deep respect and a desire to preserve the elements that originally attracted me to the tradition, I began a detailed study of early American coverlets. This was not just an historical study, but an analysis of the visual and structural elements. With the hope of inspiring others, I will record some of the decisions that I made. The following order is not the sequence in which these decisions were made, but is an attempt to clarify my not-too-logical progression.

When I began looking at coverlets, the overshot seemed too busy and impractical a weave structure. I was far more attracted to the tightly woven Summer and Winter. After producing the inevitable sampler, I very soon settled on a method of weaving in doubles that I have used in my explorations for the last dozen years. From the start, I felt that I personally had something very definite to contribute in how designs were emphasized. I found the yarns, colors, and proportions used in the original coverlet designs to be unexciting. As a contemporary weaver, I had at my disposal a vast variety of yarns in many textures and a rainbow of colors. To increase the tactile quality of a piece, I contrasted textures; smooth against bumpy, fuzzy against fine, slubbed against looped. This richness of surface added another dimension to the work.

Using color has been a perceived strength of mine since at the age of four an artist friend of my parents pronounced, "That girl has a good color sense." Many of my color schemes are suggested by relationships I see around me. By focusing on proportions of color and their juxtaposition, I strive to convey the feeling of a scene rather than an exact representation of it. Frequently, I will establish a color problem for myself, because I enjoy the challenge of impossible color combinations. Or, sometimes I use colors that have strong preconceived assumptions about them in new relations. It is intriguing to see a color respond to colors around it. Some experiments evolve from taking one color and exposing it to different neighbors to see how it changes. In another avenue, I like to investigate many varied aspects of one color, not only using similar hues and a variety of tones, but also exploring different textures as they affect the color property. However, I don't feel too radical in altering yarn texture or color from the original designs, because I am sure that my great-grandmother would have also done this if she had had my resources.

Very early in my investigation of coverlets I decided on the wall hanging format for the presentation of my designs. This format focused on the particular patterns without being confused by function. In my experiments I drastically changed the size and proportions of many of the designs. In the originals the designs were repeated many times to give an all over pattern effect. This seemed too busy. Since I was fascinated by the individual figures, I gave them importance by making them large and isolating them in their own space. Also, I elongated the individual figure to better fit the rectangular format in which I now placed them. Through most of my experimentation along this line I have continued the symmetrical presentation of the design figures. However, in my most recent work, this is beginning to give way to asymmetrical presentation of the designs (Figure 1).

I looked at those delightful patterns in early American coverlets. First, I copied. A lot can be learned from copying if one is sensitive to the process as one is going through it. Coverlet patterns are comprised of a dominant design and one or more minor ones. The designs are symmetrical and symmetrically placed. Second, I began to combine the design figures into new combinations



1. *Triple Seal*, 80 x 40 asymmetrical presentation.

(Figure 4). This is also within the tradition. As patterns passed from weaver to weaver, the designs were often shuffled and reordered into new patterns. In studying coverlets, I would come across parts I found interesting, without liking the whole. I created new relationships of these parts by combining them to call attention to the individual figures. Through analysis of the pattern elements, I was able to create my own pseudo-coverlet designs.

Sometimes they were larger or did not repeat or stress individual values, but they were all built on the same principles. At this point, I must say that my own designs were not necessarily better, but just suited to the purpose of a particular piece.

There has developed a very interesting side factor to this work. Summer and Winter is a block weave. To produce a given design there is a specific order in which the blocks must be taken. When a long warp is to be used, the familiar 'tromp-as-writ' symmetrical figure is always the first tried. But as any weaver knows, this often is not the most interesting. Other symmetrical figures can be created by changing the tie-up but keeping the treadling the same. This is usually done to produce a bolder figure. Occasionally a particular idea calls for a longer form. Then a series of blocks is repeated within a figure until it fulfills the concept (Figure 2). As there continues to be warp, then mostly out of boredom, one lets the blocks grow into shapes. These are less shapes per se, but rather large color areas (Figure 3). They are interesting in themselves, but benefit from being combined with the traditional pattern in the same piece. For another variation, I let the blocks appear randomly, each in their own color area. In other words, each time I change my weft color I select a different warp block or blocks. These are often color studies. To be honest, some of my most exciting recent work has come out of this playing.

In presenting the variations the reader might assume that my development has been linear, one idea neatly growing out of another. This is not the case. The order has been imposed after the fact. On one warp with the drafting plan taken from an old coverlet, I might weave several hangings in the same treadling sequence with the variations in color only. Or, I might use very different treadlings to produce new shapes or blocks while sticking to a basic color scheme. I realize the potential of each warp while working on it. Of the five hangings produced on a warp, invariably the last one or two are the best. There is never a master plan for a warp. Ideas are generated out of what happens, always being open to possibilities. I don't work in a vacuum or have the singlemindedness of purpose that some weavers exhibit, so in reality my influences are varied and come from many directions.

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2. *Seal of Spring, 80 x 40, different treadling to produce new figure.*



3. *Progression, 60 x 35, new shapes.*



4. *Sunset, 75 x 40 center, 75 x 20 sides. Recombining figures.*

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