

TAPESTRY THROUGH THE AGES

THE WEAVING OF TAPESTRIES

PART I

By Trude Guermonprez

It may seem superfluous to start with the statement that all weaving is an interlacing of vertical (warp) and horizontal (weft) elements. But I shall refer to this statement and the obligation it places on us at frequent intervals.

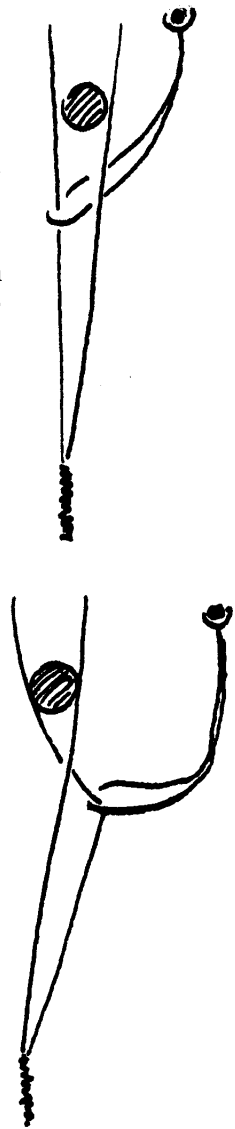
A woven piece—a fabric—will at all times express the character of its structural form: the perpendicular interlacing of weft into warp. The warp, being a series of threads spaced at regular intervals, kept under tension, dividing into alternately raised and lowered threads, permits the weft thread to pass in-between.

A tapestry—as we generally accept the meaning of the word—is a woven fabric. Its specific nature is that of a protective piece of weaving, covering the wall or a piece of furniture, or serving as a room divider, carrying with it a feeling of decoration, of embellishment, of emphasis for a particular spot.

At least that was the case at the end of the 14th century in France when *le tapisier*, the man who hung the rugs (French: tapis—rug) was an important member of the royal household, travelling frequently with the court to the fields of battle or in pursuit of political missions. It was his task to spread huge tapestries wherever the court decided to stay. Cold stone castles were made to look and feel more comfortable by hanging giant weavings on the walls. Bed-chambers and other rooms of privacy were created by using them as space dividers. On the battlefield, a barn was disguised with them, to look like royal quarters.

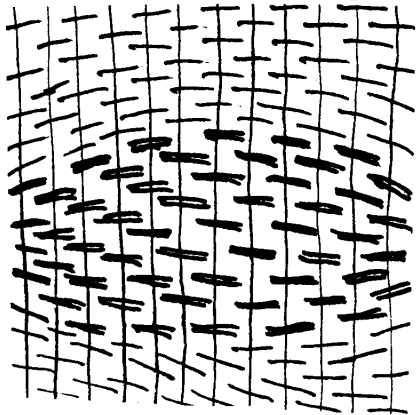
On the tapestries were depicted the stories of the bible, scenes of courtly life, heroic experiences from the lives of their owners. All this was designed by contemporary masters—often in miniature for the sake of book illustration—and then transposed into weaving by skillful artisans in the shops of the tapestry weavers. The production of these laborious pieces of weaving was carried out as an industry, serving the needs of the nobility. Qualified weavers were established in the ateliers (studios) under the guidance of a master craftsman.

In some studios, today as then, the looms have the warp stretched upright (*haute lisse*) and in others the horizontal warp is used (*basse lisse*). In both cases the warp is divided by a lease-rod into two sets of alternate threads—forming thus one open shed. The warp threads behind the lease rod are strung singly through half-heddles which can be pulled up in small groups by hand. Thus, by carrying the threads from behind the lease rod forward, the opposite shed is created. The warp material is usually cotton, the weft is wool. The den-



sity relationship of warp and weft is such that the wool, when woven in, covers the warp completely in a rep-like surface.

In order to reproduce the design or "cartoon" in tapestry technique, the outlines of the design are traced on the warp; the cartoon is placed where the weaver can see it. Several weavers start working at different places next to each other. With the weft threads wound on little *brochettes* (spools) the weaver shuttles back and forth, building up, always a receding area of color. The weft thread is beaten down with a comb. One area completed, the neighboring one is built up. Interlocking of weft threads is unnecessary, where curved or di-



agonal borderlines are indicated. A vertical borderline of color areas will become a slit in the fabric, which often is sewn together later, but can be interlocked during the weaving. The weaver works on the reverse side of the fabric. Small mirrors attached in back of the warp, make it possible to check the completed parts against the cartoon.

Thus a woven design grows by interlacing weft perpendicularly into warp. As the areas that are woven at one time are small, and the beating down by hand cannot be strictly horizontal, as with a mechanically guided beater, the weaver will find it possible to shape the rounded outlines somewhat with the comb, a freedom typical for tapestry weaving, and, when used successively, a lovely element of design.



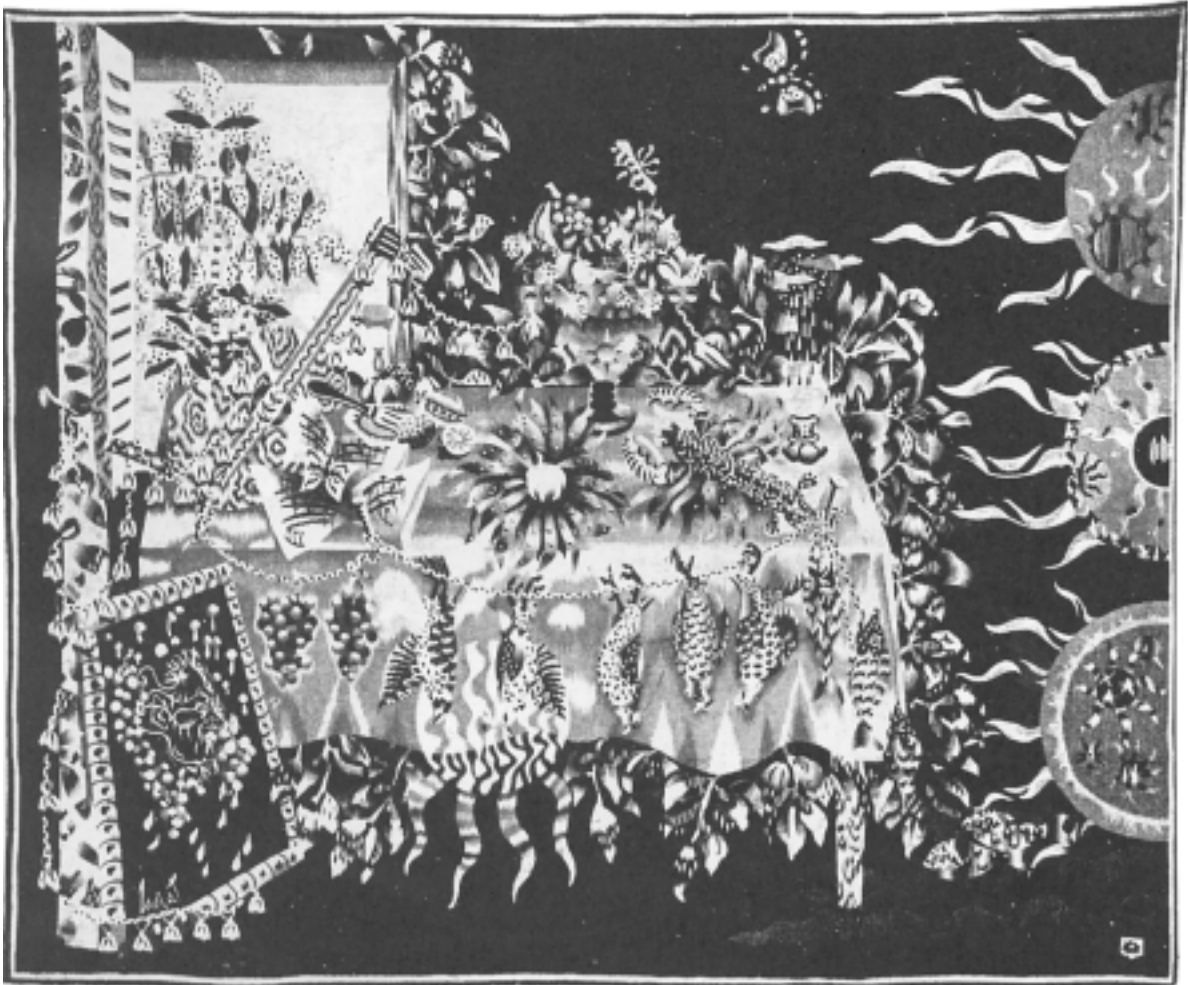
*Wool Tapestry. "Pasiphaë"
Coptic, 5th-6th Century.
New York, Brooklyn Museum.*

*Detail of "Bal
des Sauvages."*

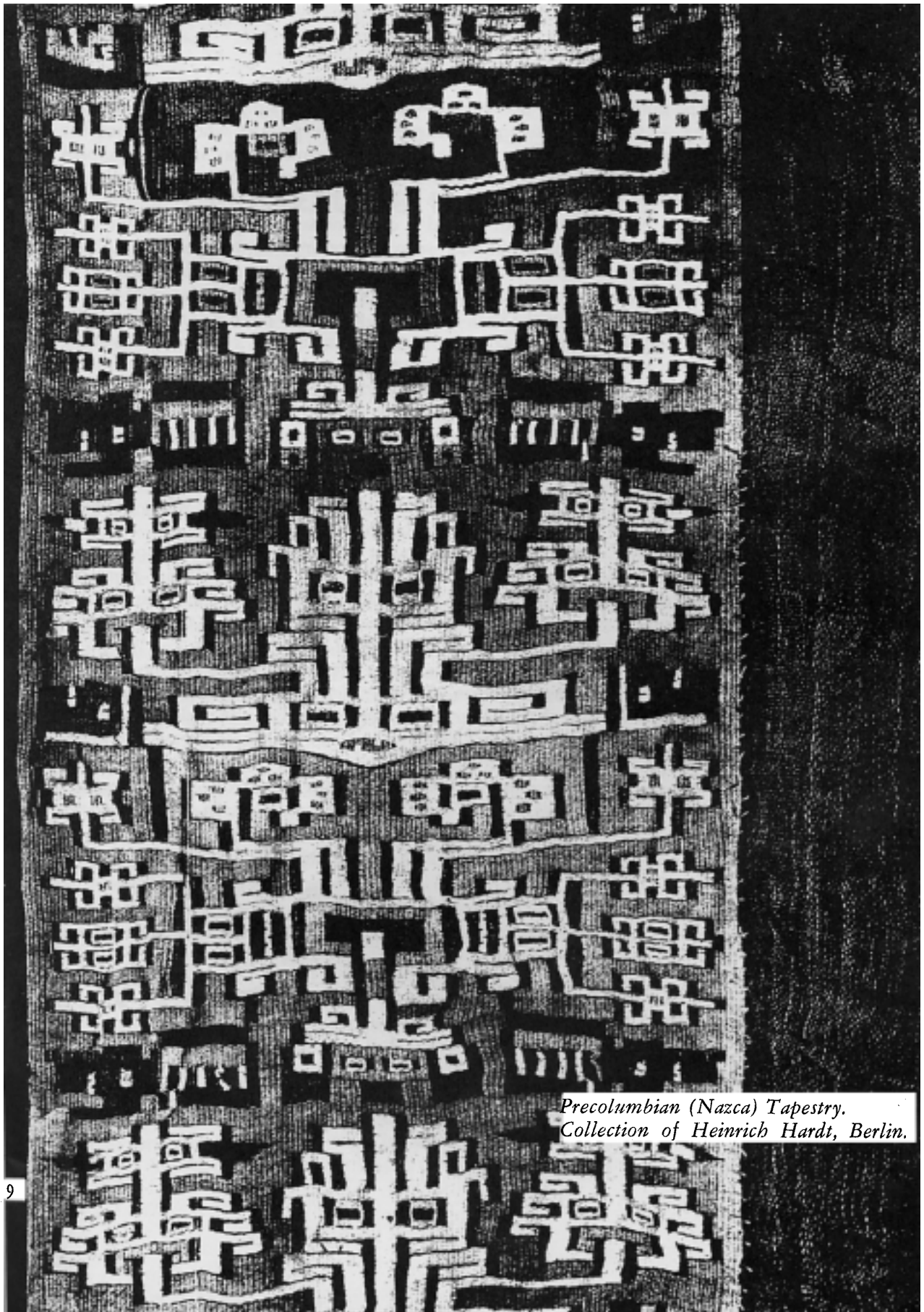


It is clear that the individual expression of the craftsman and the material are both quite subordinated to the ultimate goal: the reproduction of a design—a painting—as faithfully as possible.

It is due to the coarseness of the material and set, and a very small range of vegetable-dyed colors, that the earliest tapestries show still a distinct charm of the handworked—the woven piece. In later centuries this feature disappears, as everything tended to aim at a more exact copy of the cartoon rather than at the interpretation of it. The range of color grew; the yarns and densities became finer, and great quantities of meaningless tapestries were the result. As the whole tapestry industry persisted in this unpersonal, commercial way until the present time, it took, significantly enough, the painter of the twentieth century to become aware of the incongruity in this field of the decorative arts. We must give to Jean Lurçat credit for this new understanding and for a revival of the French tapestry-making shops, though the tapestries remain a reproductive craft rather than a creative art.

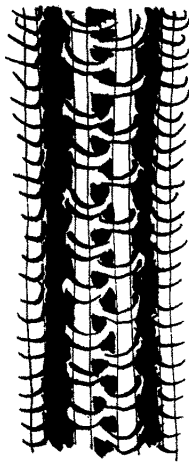


Jean Lurçat. "Le Soleil Sous la Table." 1943. Aubusson. Galerie Louis Carre.



*Precolumbian (Nazca) Tapestry.
Collection of Heinrich Hardt, Berlin.*

The same technique of weaving—for the sake of simplicity called tapestry weaving — took on quite another expression: the peoples who developed the art with the designer and the weaver one and the same person. In Precolumbian weaving we find the finest examples of design integrated with masterfully applied weaving skill. In Peru, before the time of the Spanish conquests, the product of the tapestry loom played a different role. Tapestry was not used for architectural purposes, but was worn as clothing, or wrapped around personal possessions. A great deal of the finest weaving was used for dressing the dead, and mummies have been found wrapped in layer after layer of cloths. The looms used were of the back-strap type, and every piece was woven wholly by one individual. The designs are symbols, created by ritual and tradition, but shaped through the technique the craftsman used. It was the rectangular interlacing of warp and weft which determined the forms.



A striking example is the way in which the precolumbian weaver used the appearance of the "slit" in weaving. (The slit comes about when two color areas meet vertically.) At the slit between two color areas, two warp threads were singled out and a weft thread of a contrasting color wound around them as: O The slit was not closed, but emphasized. What first was a technical accident, became a striking feature of the total design.

The same mastery of the craft, and at the same time willful application of its peculiar structural features, can be found in Coptic weaving. Here the forms of the design were modified by the limitations of the craft, through the weaver manipulating his beating comb in such modelling ways that it is sometimes hard to find the right-angle interlacing of warp and weft.

In old Flemish, Polish and Scandinavian tapestries, wherever the designer and weaver were the same person, the tapestries carried a much stronger personal and textile expression. The technique of interlocked rectangles determined the design and often the dovetail-interlacing of the weft threads gave the forms of people and flowers their stylized character.

We contemporary weavers derive our expression from these designer-weaver peoples rather than from the French tapestry makers. In the next article, I shall point out how contemporary life and thinking have given us a new variety of possibilities for, "The Weaving of Tapestries."

