

TAPESTRY THROUGH THE AGES

THE WEAVING OF TAPESTRIES PART II

By Trude Guermonprez

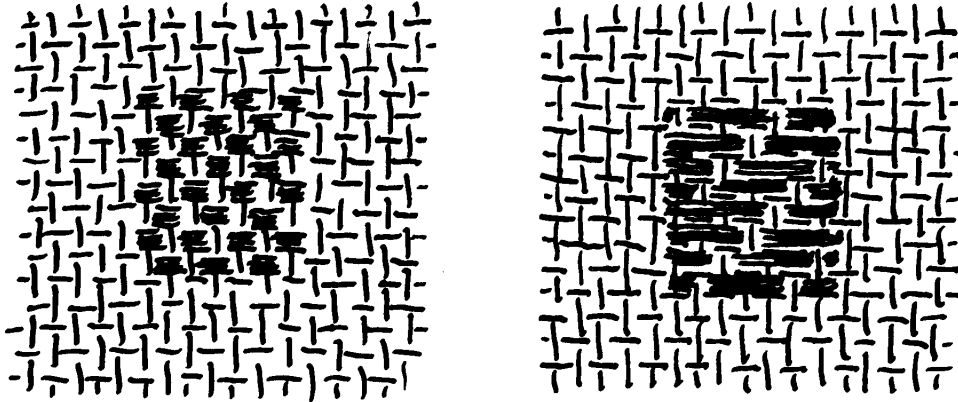
In all forms of art and architecture, as well as in the very young field of industrial design, man has become conscious of the oneness of design, material, technique, function. No more do we enjoy flower carved cast iron pedestals for sewing machines; and the homes we call the most beautiful have to answer our rigid demands for well solved functionalism, but pleasing in aesthetic aspects as well. Tapestries were part of interiors for the medieval man, fulfilling a definite functional role, as I have pointed out in my previous article. Today the actual need for fabrics in homes—from the protective point of view—is almost completely eliminated. We have air conditioned, central heated homes; insulating building material may be opaque or translucent, synthetic leathers may cover furniture, a textured paint may enliven a wall. The artist-craftsman finds himself not needed in the strictest sense of the word. But the awareness of the abstract form value of texture and color by modern painters, and the modern architect's increased emphasis on the self-expressive beauty of structure, has led to a new recognition of the work of the contemporary craftsman.

With all the modern comfort we still need a feeling of warmth, the emphasis of a well designed individually interpreted piece of craft. The tapestry designer-weaver can yet find justification for his work. His contemporary thinking, his experience in a great variety of weaving structures, opens up a large field of personal expression. He will be able to design the piece of textile which enlivens a wall without being too demanding, or he will make the screen which divides and enhances too, or he will be tempted by the beauty of his material to find the right weave in which to present it as a precious, decorative element.

If one is conscious of the beauty of color and proportion, even a carefully executed plaid in a clear plainweave would be used as the theme of a fine wall hanging. Keyed in color to its environment, designed in self-contained proportions, it would provide a feeling of relief for one particular spot in the room. The possibilities of tabby are numerous: by change of size in thread alone, boldly applied color alterations in groups (logcabin, houndstooth, etc), by different texture of thread, by color, and by open and dense settings of warp and weft. The next step from such a seemingly simple weave, though it has to be carefully planned to be satisfactory, might be the designer's wish to introduce some moments of color or texture which are present in neither

the element of the warp nor the continuous weft. Inlay is the answer to this.

Inlay is a form of woven embroidery. To the continuous weft thread an additional thread is layed in partway, either in the same shed or in a treadling which allows the inlay thread to raise above the continuous weft. For

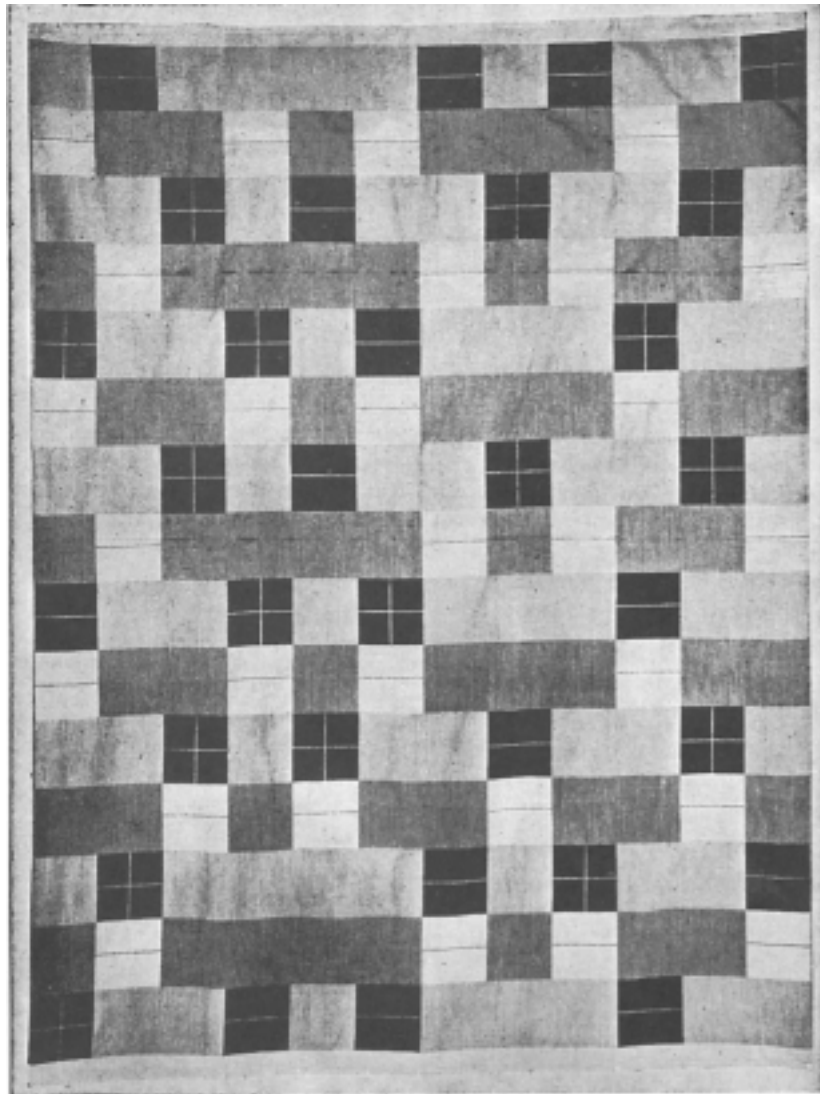


instance: a groundweave in soft green tabby, one inlay block in blue tabby, one inlay block in blue twill. The first block will appear as a fairly even mixture of green and blue, the second as predominantly blue. Thus we are able by the means of the weave, but with one and the same thread, to achieve different nuances in color. What could be more painterly? (See cover photograph.) At the same time we get also a changing expression of texture, which adds to the interest of our design. A French couple of weavers have done remarkable design interpretation in this techn

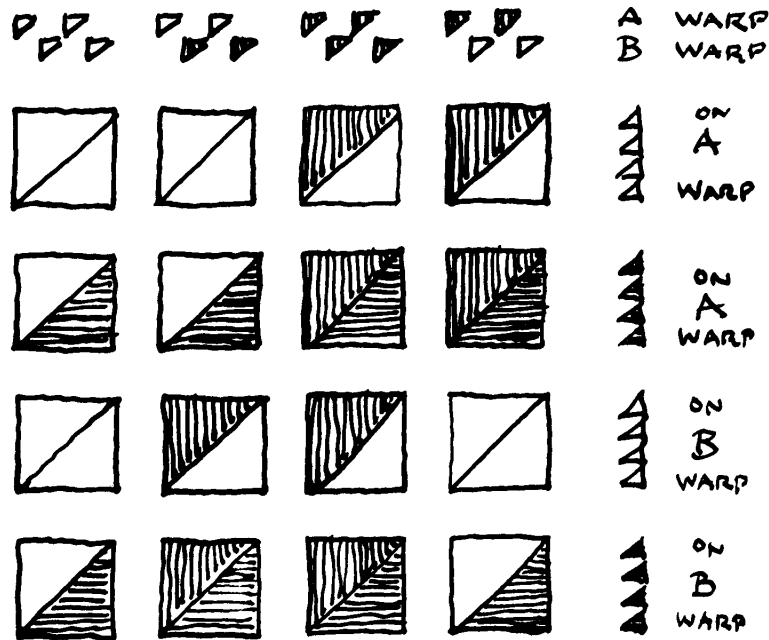
*Liturgical ornament in the weaving,
shows how Plasse Le Caisne
works from a cartoon by Manessier.*



As soon as we have become conscious of the pictorial expression possibilities of pure weaving technique, having had previous experience in different weaves, we shall be tempted to use some of them in a well planned, singular composition. Take for instance the possibility of the double weave. The double weave on a four-harness loom permits us to have literally two sets of warp, each of which can be of a different color, or texture, or both. If we make use of this possibility of changing warps, during the weaving of a piece, and use the weft color/texture in a coordinated fashion, we can make a composition which, though bound by rectangular outlines, can have the excitement of a



*TAPESTRY by ANNI ALBERS, Black Mountain College
Bulletin 5.*

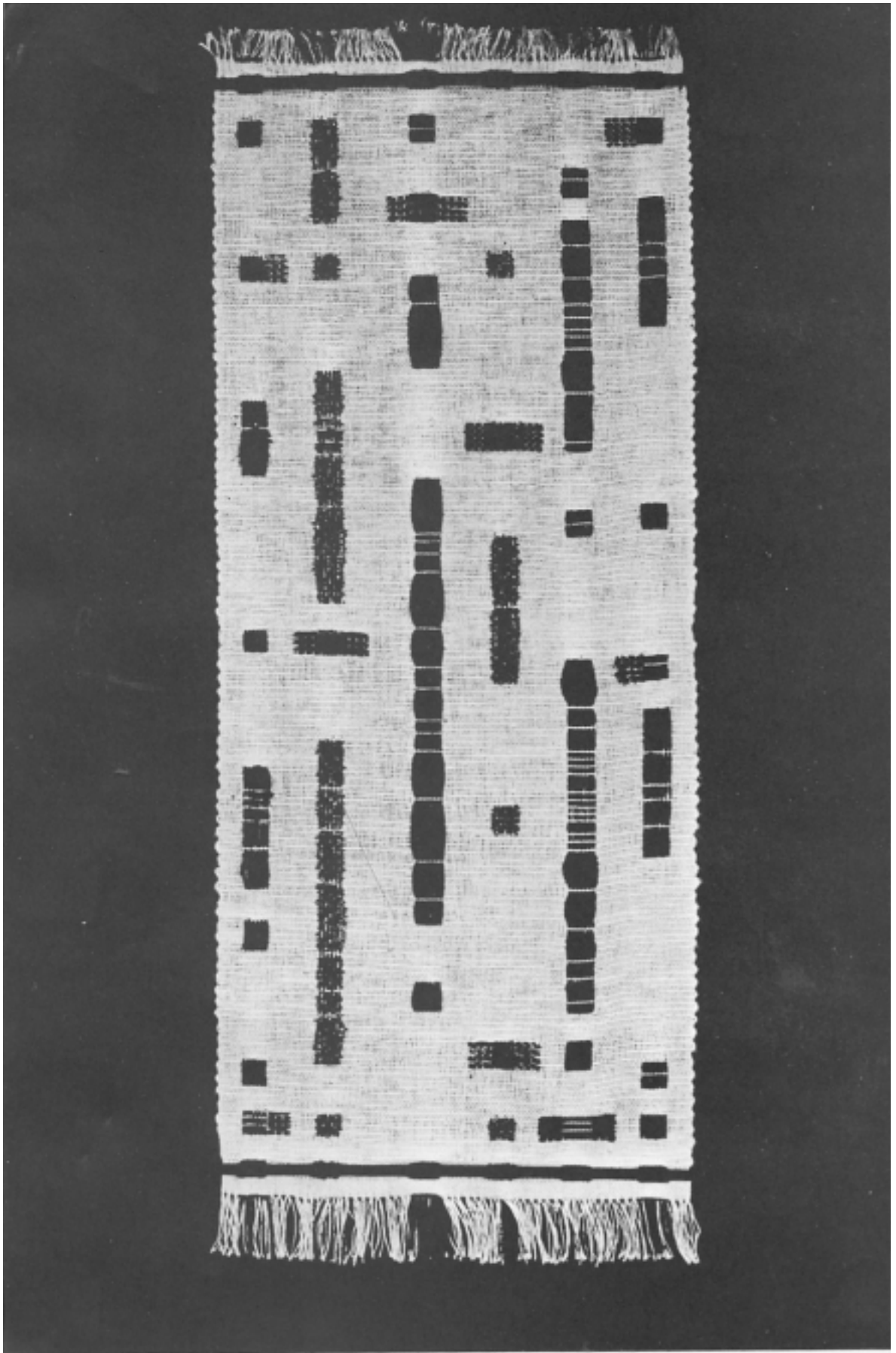


Scheme of some possibilities of color mixture with only two colors in warp and weft on four-harness double weave.

Mondrain painting. On eight harnesses of course the possibilities of warp change multiply. The advance planning of alteration of color order and the proportion relationship of areas, are the decisive factors for a successful composition. Besides using the double weave set-up straight, we can ^{add} inlay to it as a new element of design.

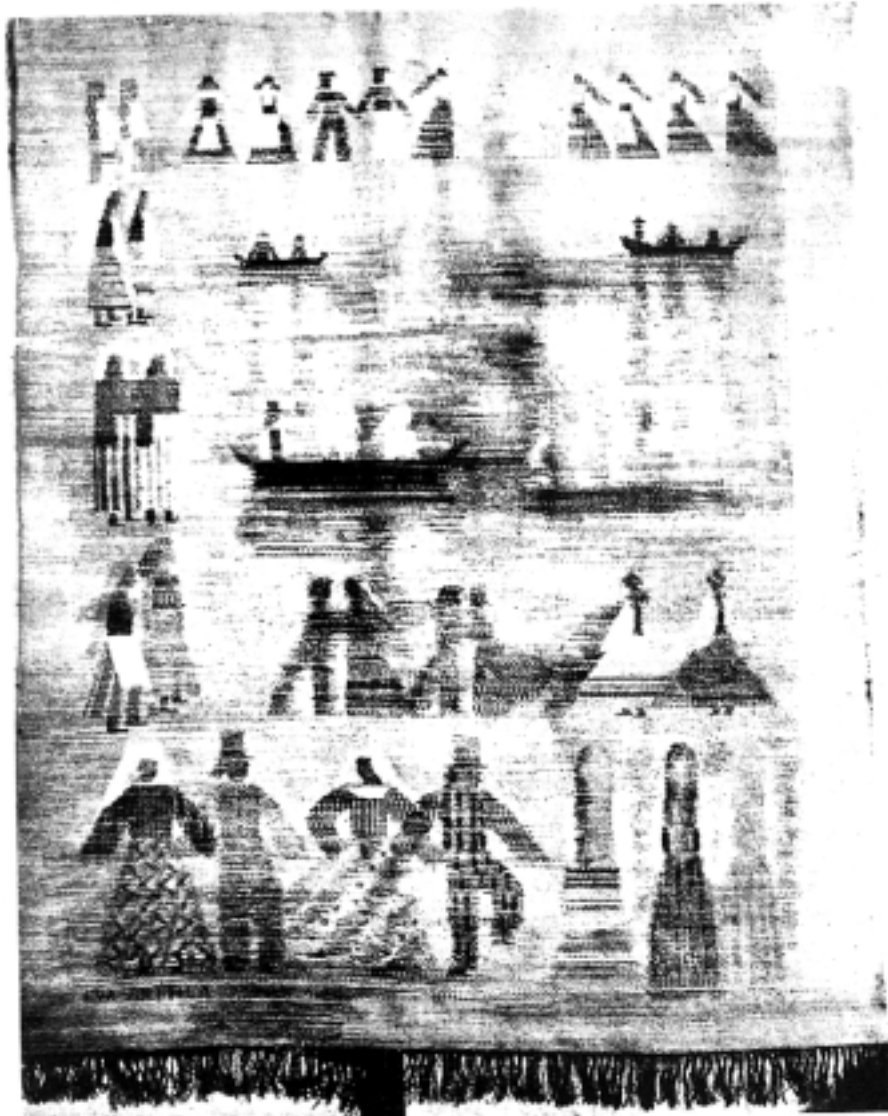
Another useful set-up for abstract compositions is the threading where we use two harnesses only for a groundweave warp in tabby, and where we have from two to six (according to the loom) extra harnesses for brocading warp threads. If the density of the groundweave warp is established throughout, we have only to add warp threads of different color or texture, in spots or areas, according to the plan we have in mind. These threads, distributed over the free harnesses, can be raised or lowered at any time during the weaving of the groundweave. Thus they can float over it for some time, or be woven in with it, or disappear completely, each brocading harness being independent in its action from the others. Spots or lines or areas or outstanding color and different texture will appear on the surface, and clever arrangement of these brocading threads can allow us to make all sorts of geometric figures, even to the extent of stylized flowers and animals, if we so desire.

These are only a few indications of how a certain warp set-up, color, material, threading, are very often the sole design elements with which to



work. The stricter these compositions are planned, the more they will be a true textile expression.

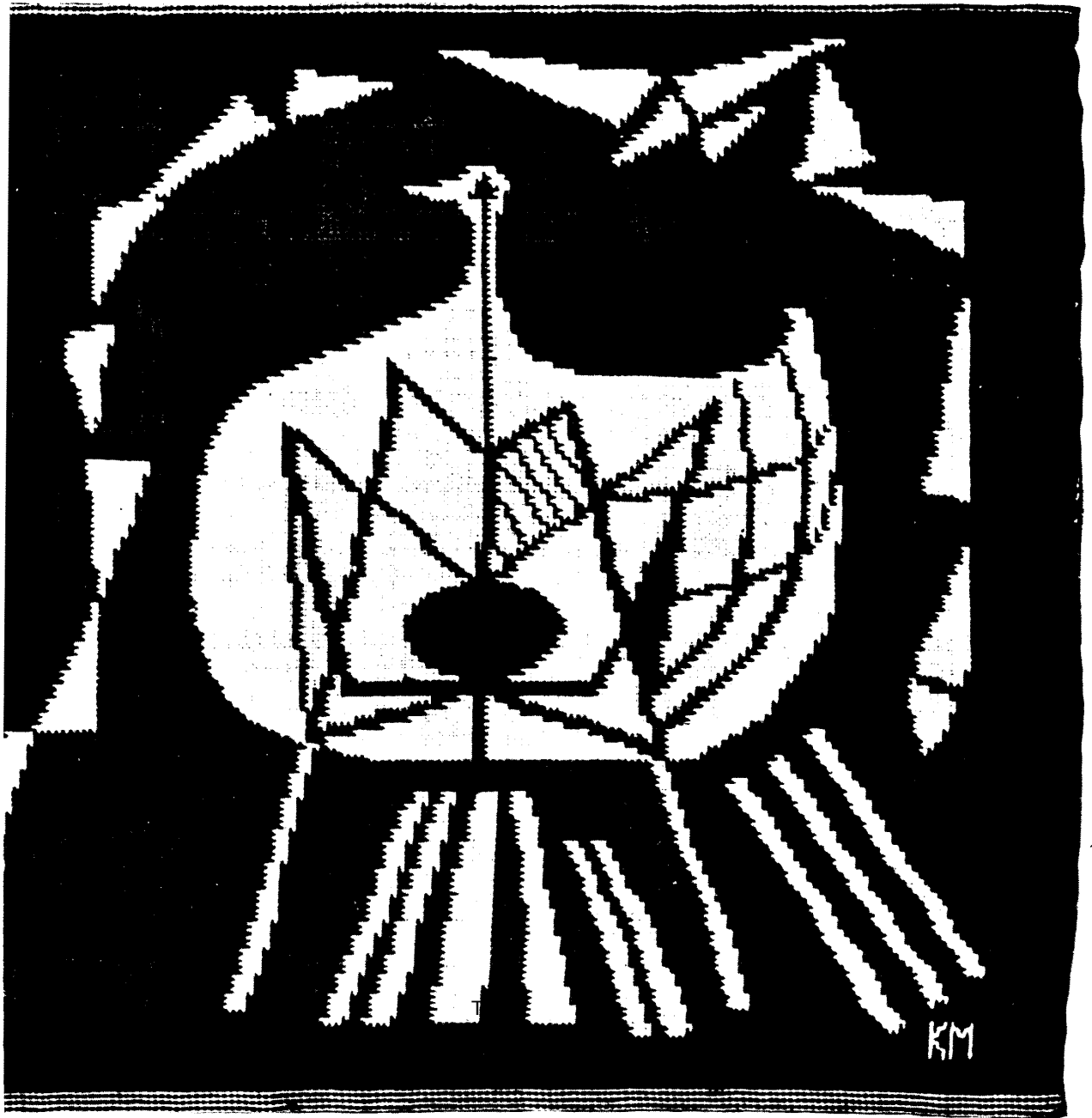
But many of us still wish to have the freedom to express forms which are derived from the visual world around us, rather than those forms dictated by the loom. For this purpose we can find beautiful examples of work in contemporary Scandinavian weaving. The weavers in these countries have been able to develop traditional techniques (such as Finnweave, Tapestry technique) into a more contemporary form of expression than the French tapestry weav-



TAPESTRY by Eva Antilla, Finland.

← *TAPESTRY by Kay Sekinachi, Berkeley, California.*





*Linen TAPESTRY. Design: Kaisa Melanton. Executed by For-
eningen Handarbetets Vanner, Stockholm, Sweden.*

ers have. In the small tapestries of Eva Antilla, or Dora Young, we find that the warp thread, the texture of the weft thread, different interlacing patterns, all enter into the tapestry weaving as design elements. The designer and weaver are one and the same person, and so we find, similar to the aspect of Precolumbian weaving, that the expression of their tapestries is a thoroughly satisfactory, contemporary one. These pieces are small. They will give a lovely distinction to walls in our living rooms, without having to fulfill the function of a protective piece of textile.

In all the suggestions which I made in this article, you will find one recurring theme: that of the well planned lay-out, the synonym of "good design." Unless we study the possibilities and conceive the woven piece as a whole, we will fail. This does not necessarily mean that every detail has to be planned on paper. The restrictive nature of our craft demands pre-planning to a high degree. If we plan to make a piece of artistic value, organization and vision ought to be integrated to an even greater extent. For the sensitive weaver there will then result a preparedness for the happy accident, the instinctual suggestion, which so often occurs during the process of execution. The artist will incorporate these living factors in his design in such a way that the end result will have the breathing, vibrating quality of an organically designed piece. The piece itself has become *design*.

Meet the Author



Biographical notes on Trude Guermonprez, who is the wife of John Elssesser, San Francisco architect-builder, take the form of an outline of her unusual professional career.

Training:

Art and Craft schools in Cologne and Halle, Germany.
Diploma graduation in Textile Design, Berlin, 1933.
Apprenticeship in cotton mill in Czechoslovakia.
Scholarship study in Finland, 1937.
Fellowship for travel and research in Sweden, 1946.

Experience:

Freelance designer in Holland, 1939 to 1947, for architects, mills, production.
Freelance designer in the USA from 1947 to the present. Has worked for Architects Associated, New York; Eric Mendelsohn, San Francisco; Marcel Breuer, Ashville; and for interior decorators, private customers, and for a New York cotton mill (dress fabrics).

Teaching:

Volkshoguel School, Holland, 1944 to 1946.
Black Mountain College, North Carolina, 1947 to 1949.
Pond Farm Workshop, Guerneville, Calif, 1949 to 1951.
California College of Arts and Crafts, Oakland, since 1953.

Exhibitions:

Europe and USA.
All national shows.
At present: New York, The Museum of Contemporary Crafts, rugs and wall hangings, and The Architectural League of New York.