

Shuttlecraft Bulletin: On Weaving Coverlets

Happy New Year! It is 2020 and time to clean off the looms and plan for that big project: a coverlet. Mary wrote in January 1935 and 1936 on the topic as she had in many previous January Bulletins. The holidays are over, and it is time to tackle that large project that she wrote every serious weaver should undertake as it is “the traditional *magnum opus* of our craft.” It is a thing to adorn life for many years and to be handed down to those who come after us as a happy reminder, an “unpretentious but intimate memorial.”

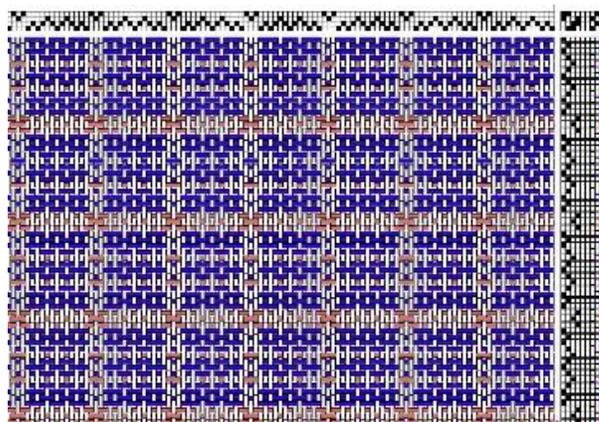
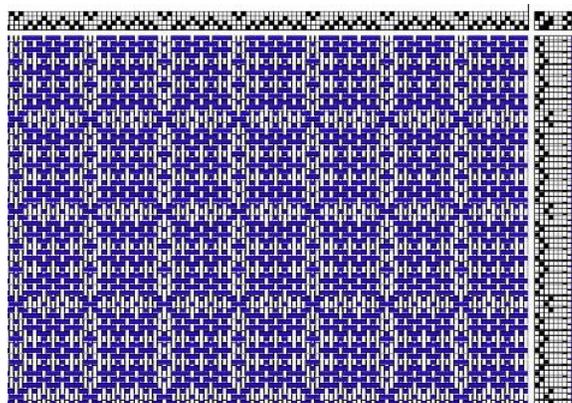
Coverlets woven in the northern states were generally woven in two colors in the pattern weft yarns, dark blue from indigo dyed yarns and red, from madder dyed ones. The madder dyed yarns faded over time to a lovely rose brown, a color that Mary mentioned often in these 2 Bulletins. In the South, the weavers experimented with more colors and combinations that might not be considered traditional. They used greens, yellows and brown; black too. The southern weavers changed colors in the weft to give a striped effect. Mary thought the multicolor pieces were livelier in effect.

The best source that I know of images of colored coverlets is Helene Bress’s work: *The Coverlet Book Early American Handwoven Coverlets 2 Volume Set*, it is in the Guild library. There are some beautiful color combinations there, displayed in over 1,000 photographs.

Coverlets were traditionally woven with a linen or cotton warp and tabby weft, and a wool pattern weft. Mary wrote that we need not be limited to the traditional material, she recommended the use of rayon and or silk. She stated that weavers should not be limited to the traditional patterns, stating: “our art is a living art.” She recommended that Guild members not hesitate to use the old patterns in a new way to produce forms of beauty to express new manners. But the drafts included in both Bulletins were the classic American colonial 4 harness overshot.

In 1935, she included a “Diamond Arrangement” draft and a plan for a coverlet in old Fairbanks House, Dedham, Massachusetts, done in 10/2 cotton warp (24 epi) and tabby yarn and a coarse handspun in dark blue and madder rose for the pattern weft. She gave

instructions on how to use the Fairbanks pattern for pillow tops and table squares. In 1936, she gave a few small overshot patterns, with treading recommendations for 2 of them, as well as a crackle draft. I have included 2 versions of Sweetbriar, one in the traditional white warp and tabby with blue pattern weft and the other in a 2-color pattern weft.



She referred weavers with “modernistic leanings” to the Recipe Book for additional 4 and 8 shaft patterns.

So, with the New Year, consider that large project and start weaving. I will leave you with a Mary Meigs Atwater quote from the January 1935 Bulletin:

“We weavers with our simple hand looms, by going back to the fine clear beauty of the ancient days, have thrown a bridge over the ugliness of the machine-made age just behind us. It is not a dead art we are reviving but a new and growing art that will flower into who can tell what wonderful new blossoming.” M.M. Atwater