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Handspun's Important Values in Fiber Art

by Stanley Bulbach, Ph.D.

This handspun theme presents a considerable challenge. We contributors are supposed to discuss our stepping out of the tapestry mainstream to use non-standard materials — handspun yarns — in our woven art.

The wisest way to discuss why we use non-standard materials is to begin by making sure first that everyone is familiar with the use of standard materials. And for each of us as individual weavers, the reasons why we select any of the materials we use are founded upon both avocational (hobbyist) and professional (commercial) considerations: professional even if only regarding where we can dependably purchase supplies and materials; and avocational even if only regarding our characteristically deep attraction to this art form.

Unfortunately, not much dialogue has been encouraged about our field's standard materials, what they are, why they are used, and what might be important about them. Yet probing dialogue like this is crucial for ATA members, especially if we want scholars to research and record our field accurately, if we desire exhibition opportunities and audiences, and if we seek markets.

The issue of materials goes directly to the heart of one of our field's most important questions: "Why does the contemporary art establishment assign a lower hierarchical importance and value to woven imagery than to painted imagery?" Obviously, many answers lie in the specific materials we select for creating our art work.

So this theme is a rare opportunity to discuss ideas and information. All of the contributors to the ATA theme in this issue have volunteered to address their use of non-standard materials — handspun yarns. As the theme coordinator, I hope the insights they share help the ATA and its community open up wider probing discussions on our field's important issues.

My Art Form

While my art work is flatwoven weft-faced, it is not technically classical tapestry, but a much older ancestor in the "tapis" family. It is traditional Near Eastern carpet weaving. And today, handspinning is the only way to secure yarns with the specific types of wool and yarn structure that made this ancient traditional art form so very special.

One of the key differences between traditional Near Eastern carpet weaving and classical tapestry art is that qualities of the materials used in the traditional carpet weaving bear much greater importance in the finished piece. Another difference is that the woven structure in traditional carpet weaving has a greater impact in the creation of the design and imagery. A third key difference is that the intended function of the carpet traditionally has an important influence on the design and imagery. Not only are these priorities personally important as an artist, they are crucially important for those who acquire my art work.



Stanley Bulbach, "Third Sephardic Cemetery" 1997, detail, carpet bed, approx 6 x 3'. Photo by Stanley Bulbach.



"Sixth Avenue" 2010, detail, prayer carpet, handspun lustrous Lincoln longwools, natural dyes and the artist, approx. 6 x 3'. Photo by Stanley Bulbach.

In the traditional carpet weaving arts I pursue, handspun yarns are the standard material. It was the unique characteristics and qualities of the handspun yarns and their relationship to the finished piece that seized my attention during my graduate studies of the ancient Near East. And in this traditional art form it is the handspun yarns that are crucial to the beauty, the animating spirit, the importance, and the value of the finished woven piece.

I always found weaving and textiles to be fascinating. Their structure, their composition, their history, their purposes, and their importance all captivated me aesthetically and intellectually. But when I first explored weaving, I used commercially available, industrially produced yarns. The final results disappointed me, but I didn't understand why. It wasn't until I was guided to look more carefully at traditional ethnic work that I realized that so much of the spirit animating the traditional work resided within the original materials themselves.

Handspun Wools

By the 1970s there had already been a rebirth of handspinning in the West, but the field has never really developed effectively over the subsequent third of a century. Fiber organizations and organizational advocacies focused on handspinning as a hobby whose primary purpose was to be a pastime having fun with historic recreation and "all natural" materials. There has been almost no focus on handspinning as the creation of yarns with uniquely superior qualities that are highly desirable, valuable, and marketable. On the one hand, our

advocacies have not encouraged basic market education and market development; while on the other hand, they ardently solicit donations to cover their organizational budgets.



Stanley Bulbach, "Requiem" 1997, detail with fringe, flying carpet, approx. 6x3'. Photo by Stanley Bulbach

The modern rebirth of handspinning in recent decades is founded upon the renewed availability of a very wide range of sheep breeds and their many different types of wools. It is also founded on varying the ways to prepare and spin the selected wools to create vastly different types of yarns otherwise unavailable. Within those two wide-ranging variables of material and technique, one can tailor-make wool yarns that are far superior for their final intended use than is the relatively limited range of standard industrially produced stock commercially available today.

Carpet Wools

In the flatwoven carpet traditions, the most prized works have been ones woven from yarns of the most lustrous of wools. Typically, those are "longwools" grown in higher elevations. The wool fibers for this carpet weaving have characteristics opposite of those used in most of the garment industry. For close-to-skin garments Merino wools are sought for their short annual growth of a couple inches, their extremely narrow fiber diameters whose softness does not cause itching, and their high crimp count which maximizes drape, breathability, and warmth.

The longest wools are from the Lincoln breed, which I use for my work. Lincoln fibers have very large diameters, have waviness instead of crimp, and have large plaques on the fibers which are highly reflective. The Lincoln fibers have very long annual growth of up to 18" in some flocks and have extreme tensile strength. Yarns from Lincoln wool are designed to maximize hardness and durability.

Custom tailoring hand-spun yarn includes designing or engineering how the selected fibers will be prepared and spun. This includes deciding whether the wools will be woolen or worsted spun or variations between the two. In woolen spinning, the fibers enter the forming yarn at a right angle to the yarn, making a more coiled, more elastic, heat-trapping yarn. In worsted spinning, the fibers enter the forming yarn parallel to the yarn, making a more twisted, less elastic, harder, and cooler yarn.

In traditional carpet weaving, the worsted qualities are prized. Historically, those qualities were also preferred in tapestry weaving. With the rebirth of fiber art in the 1960s, tapestry weavers were also encouraged to use woolen spun yarns for the pronounced textures they created. Unfortunately many of those same yarns were liable to stretching, felting, and trapping visible dirt within the yarn structure. Over time, many of those materials incurred permanent damage, causing major curatorial issues and significant deterioration of market value.



Cory Simpson's Lincoln longwools fleece. Photo by Stanley Bulbach.

The worsted spun yarns of Lincoln wool are the strongest and least elastic of wool yarns. They are also the most lustrous. These yarns produce weft-faced weaving with a surface that is highly reflective. These yarns glow, looking significantly different as the light changes and as the viewer moves. As to the much thinner double-ply worsted yarns I create for my warps, they have a superior tensile strength and durability, perfect for the tightly strung warps this weaving technique requires.

In its industrialization and mass marketing, modern sheep farming has developed flocks of all-

purpose sheep so that when harvested the crop can be used for whatever market purpose is most profitable. This meant white wool only. Any other colors and shades wanted by factories and stores were intended to be factory-dyed to achieve maximum control over uniformity. Under that pressure from the wool industry, most sheep with any colored wools were destroyed to prevent contaminating the large, genetically pure white flocks.

In contrast, one of my primary reasons for hand-spinning my yarns is the wide range of natural colored fleeces that have become available in recent decades from growers of small flocks specifically serving today's handspinners. Today many original genetic strains have been restored. I can now secure glowing Lincoln fleece ranging from sweet butter white through platinum and silvers through grays and charcoals to black.

The Flatwoven Design

As all tapestry weavers know, weft-faced flatweaving has a strong "grain" based upon its physical structure. Only the weft yarns are visible in the finished weaving and only they present the visible designs and images. But where those visible weft yarns are located and visible depends entirely upon the perpendicular warp yarns which are not visible in the completed design and imagery.

This means that the woven structure itself dictates greatly how design elements and imagery can be created and how they will appear. For example, this structure makes it perfectly easy to create a design of bands of color that run parallel with the wefts. But that same structure also makes it difficult and tricky to create similar design bands in the perpendicular direction, that is, parallel with the warps.

Classical tapestry art is characterized by creating designs and images despite that grain, as if painting freely in all directions on a canvas. In contrast, traditional carpet weaving tends to follow the preferences of the grain and avoid working against it. That process automatically distorts and abstracts the development of design and imagery.

Design elements created in this type of weaving can be understood as comprised of certain numbers of visible weft yarns engaging and covering certain numbers of warps going back and forth. Thus, when finished, these design elements can be easily

repeated elsewhere simply by counting again. The repetition in pattern in this type of weaving creates rhythm as well. Therefore, an inherent musicality is yet another significant characteristic of the flatwoven carpet traditions.

But handspun yarns are never homogenous. While the patterns in this type of work engage the viewer as rhythmic repetitions, the handspun engages the viewer with its inevitable variations. Even when the handspun yarns are almost perfectly consistent in diameter, their color and shades inevitably have subtle gradations which draw attention. Those subtleties are the famous "abrush" that is so highly prized in the oriental carpet trade.

Thus, part of the lively animating spirit in this traditional art form is that the more exactly the weaver tries to replicate design elements, the more obvious their slight differences seem to step forward. This dynamic, of course, parallels one of the most engaging features of the craft arts — ancient and contemporary — the dance between the seemingly willful materials and the cunning of the human hand and eye.



Stanley Bulbach, "Sumac Auspices" 1983, detail, prayer carpet, handspun lustrous Lincoln longwools, natural dyes, approx. 6 x 3'. Photo by Stanley Bulbach.

A Magical Art Form

And so the replication of those abstractions, that limited palette of shades and colors, those uses, those arts, are all reasons why I weave with handspun from Lincoln longwools. The luster and glow of the yarns is unparalleled. Most contemporary art requires bright illumination, which is detrimental for fiber work, especially for protein fibers like wools and silks. But due to the use of luster wools, my work is most enjoyable in ambient lighting, even in moonlight. And the use of these handspun yarns creates a final art work that is sturdy

and can be easily handled, washed, and remounted. This all adds significant market value to the work in addition to the visibly obvious inherent quality of the wools.

But the real magic of this art form for me is not recreating what painters can do. The real magic for me includes the original functions and understandings of these traditional carpets.

For millennia, the carpet-making arts created surfaces that transformed unfamiliar ground for nomads into homes with familiar gardens. They transformed mundane ground into hallowed spaces

to pray and meditate. They transformed barren earth into auspicious birthing spaces. These arts dealt with the magic of surfaces and portals between various worlds of human consciousness and existence. They dealt with brute survival, with aspiration, with passion, and death, with worlds beyond.

I strive to recreate this magic with abstractions, patterns, their music, their colors, their shades, and of course the animating glow, all of which depends upon my handspun lustrous Lincoln longwool yarns.

Stanley Walter Bulbach lives and works in New York City. His undergraduate studies were in engineering and history of religion. His MA and Ph.D. from New York University are in Near Eastern studies. He creates prayer carpets, carpet beds, and flying carpets with contemporary designs from traditional techniques as a modern art for enjoyment on the wall. He is active as a community advocate and organizer in Manhattan. No one else in the field of fiber art has written or lectured more than he has on encouraging constructive dialogue to challenge the standards of current academic research applied in the official recording of our field's achievements.