

Not Painted Canvas, but Wonderful, Powerful Woven Art

by Stanley Bulbach, Ph.D.

The Grain Within

In recent centuries, painting has been deemed the crown jewel of artistic media. Painting permits the hand's brush to go in any direction equally easily for maximum freedom of expression. In contemporary painting, the most popular, marketable, and profitable works have characteristically been ones requiring days at most to complete.

In contrast, in the West tapestry is glossed over as derivative, secondary to painting. Tapestry characteristically requires enormous amounts of time to create. In today's market-based economy, long production time can dictate the difference between professional survival or failure, not only for artists, but also for the mediums in which they express themselves.



Stanley Bulbach, "Nieuw Amsterdam," a prayer carpet, approx. 36 in x 76 in, c 2014. Photo: Stanley Bulbach. Handspun Lincoln Longwool warp and weft, natural wool colors and vegetal dyes.

So why in the world am I an artist who weaves instead of paints? There are a several major reasons.

One is that I am not simply creating a canvas with an image painted upon it. Instead I create flat-woven carpets, which have been part of our fascinating human history for millennia. Specifically, I create authentic prayer carpets and carpet beds intended to be enjoyed on the wall as art. More fancifully, I create flying carpets too. So while the aesthetic, emotional, and intellectual expression of a painting is limited to the image itself, my expression is amplified by the woven "canvas" itself, the carpets that have been used by us human beings over millennia. By themselves, carpets reflect major aspects of human life, human experience, and human consciousness. Then I add to that the magical artistic design.

A second reason I am dedicated to this type of art is that I have been a lifelong student of the Near East as well as a resident of New York City. I am profoundly aware of how Western civilization has deep ancient roots in and current vital connections with the Near East. Unfortunately, little contemporary art in the US reflects these important bonds, even after 9/11, even after a third of a century of military engagement since 1990 in the Near East.

Third, I am enchanted by the magic of the ancient Near Eastern traditions of craft and art that are the source of our modern technologies, including computers, photo chemicals, etc. I don't buy pre-made paints and store-bought stretched woven canvas. I produce my own materials by working with sheep breeders for wools of specific qualities, including great luster and shades from black through greys and silvers to white. I create my applied colors

from traditional insect sources and plant extracts. And because the materials have such strong and willful natures, when I weave with them, they exert their own characters as a major factor of the presentation of the final work.

As much as I like to believe that I am mastering this magic and controlling all these materials, it is manifestly clear that it is the other way around: the materials take considerable control over what I am creating. I focused on much of this earlier in Tapestry Topics (“Handspun’s Important Values in Fiber Art”, December 2010, Vol. 36, No. 4, pp. 6-10.)

Therefore, let me focus now on a fourth reason why I have worked in this medium for my entire adult life. The creation of imagery in weaving is entirely different from painting imagery on canvas. And exploring this alternate reality takes me down a road quite different from traditional Eurocentric tapestry weaving. That traditional tapestry weaving has been historically characterized as art pieces created by anonymous skilled technicians copying paintings by “real” artists and transforming that imagery into a woven form. A primary priority of that tradition has been to obscure as much as possible the difference between the tapestry and the original painted imagery.

While I admire the technical tour de force that colleagues achieve in following that tradition, I myself am enchanted by the special unique “grain” inherent in the weft-faced flat-woven tapestry structure itself. And I focus on exploring that asset which is largely excluded from traditional tapestry weaving.

The Distinct Grain of Weft Faced Flat-weaving

Most of us are familiar with the artistry of wood work and cabinetmaking. In that field the fundamental considerations of the natural grain of the wood involve not only the appearance of the wood, but also the way that the wood is best worked to be most functional. Where traditional tapestry practice strives to defy structural factors that interfere with the exact replication of painted imagery, I find those same structural factors to be a treasurable aesthetic asset to be celebrated, not obscured.

The inherent “grain” of the flat-woven structure includes the greater ease and stability of horizontal design elements over vertical design elements. Similarly, geometrical angles are easier to control than curves or circles.



Stanley Bulbach, “Quercus,” a carpet bed, approx. 76 in x 36 in, c. 2011. Photo: Stanley Bulbach. Handspun Lincoln Longwool warp and weft, natural wool colors and vegetal dyes.

As an example, consider it takes a certain amount of time and effort to weave a totally monotone stretch of tapestry from one side of the piece to the other. It would be done with a “continuous” weft. The one color of yarn would be woven back and forth horizontally, perpendicular to the warps without interruptions.

If, now, the color of that weft yarn were changed every several rows, it would take the same amount of time and effort to weave the same amount of tapestry. Without the encumbrance of additional time and effort, elements of variation and even pattern can be added easily and quickly.

But if those design elements, those stripes, were required to run perpendicular to the weft, and not parallel with it, the time and effort required to do that multiply significantly. Structural issues at the interface of those design elements would arise too. A familiar classic example of this is seen in traditional “slit-weave” kilims—where the wefts of the vertical design elements are not joined together. Or in Navaho style weaving, where the wefts at the borders of adjacent vertical elements are joined the common warps they share, which sometimes leaves ridges.

Thus, when weavers of weft faced textiles work on their looms, the weaving of the design confronts distinct structural tendencies not too dissimilar to the grain of wood. While a paint brush on canvas has almost unlimited design freedom, tapestry has inherent design tendencies. As an artist, I feel they are richly expressive to develop and not to hide.

The Attractions of Abstraction

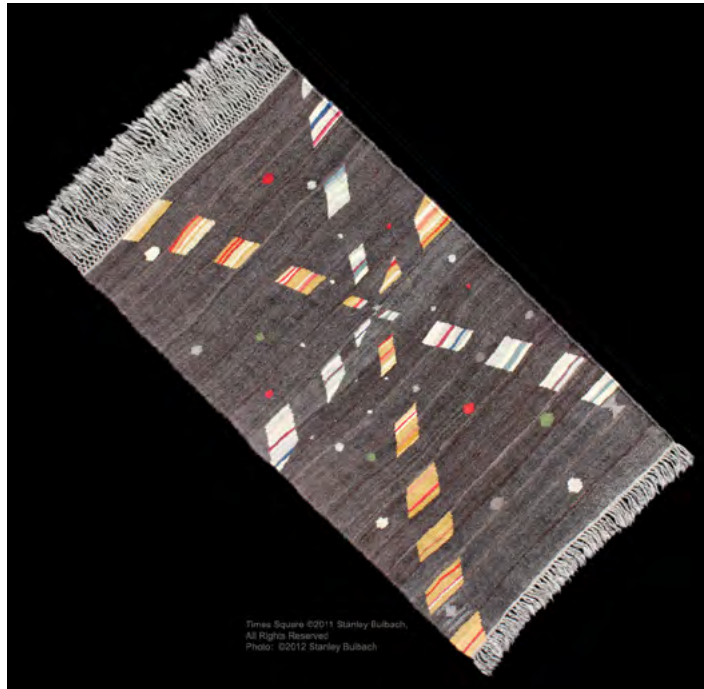
One of the most important movements in Modern Art painting is Cubism. A century after its advent, it is still lauded as a new, powerful, abstract way graphically to express reality. Cubist artists painted geometrically, almost structurally and architecturally, emphasizing facets. The leading Cubist, Pablo Picasso, is familiar to almost everyone and is still deified as one of the most important artists in Modern Art.

But Cubism wasn't entirely original. Much of that radically new way of European painting was inspired by traditional African art, particularly carved wood sculpture. The traditional African artists worked woods creating features that were typically distorted when cutting with the grain of the wood instead of against that grain. And the more abstract the distortions, the more revealing, invigorating, animating and dynamic the final representations became. As this art came to the attention of the European art world, it had a revolutionary impact on painting that changed everything.

Earlier, European society was similarly smitten by the abstract geometry, mathematics, and spectrum of Near Eastern carpets, especially weft-faced kilims. The geometric nature of weaving, especially of weft-faced flat-weaving, favored the creation of highly stylized, forms and designs. And it is the inherent grain of the woven structure and the designs that the grain favored that is so transformational, creative, and engaging as its own original art form.



Stanley Bulbach, “Sumac Auspices,” a prayer carpet, approx. 36 in x 76 in, c 1983.
Photo: Stanley Bulbach. Handspun Lincoln Longwool warp and weft, natural wool colors and vegetal dyes.



Stanley Bulbach, "Times Square," a flying carpet, approx. 36 in x 76 in, c 2011. Photo: Stanley Bulbach. Handspun Lincoln Longwool warp and weft, natural wool colors and vegetal dyes.

Marching to a Different Drummer

One of the most abstract of arts is not a visual art, but music. And inherent in the tapestry structure is a treasury of elements shared with music.

Basically, woven designs are comprised of numbers of warps covered by numbers of rows of weft yarn. In other words, design elements are translatable into numbers and then repeated, just like rhythms and similar to beats and measures not only while they are woven, but also afterwards as our eyes travel back and forth over the finished pieces.

A design element that can be represented by numbers is a design element that can be easily replicated, or replicated in reverse, or replicated upside down, or twice the size, or half as wide, etc. Here, pattern too is something shared with music, its repetitions and complex variations.

The flipping or rotating of design elements can introduce a confusion regarding which side is up. That confusion can make the flat-woven piece seem to spin, or even fly with movement.

The design element can be repeated in a different color or shade, the alteration or development of which can also constitute an important part of the "music." In North African Berber traditions, the weavers actually handed down their intricate traditional design elements via songs to assist such mathematical counts in complex design repetition.

The nature of the flat-woven structure lends itself to alternating foreground and background, which also helps to create a sense for the eyes of falling into the piece. These types of movement inherent in music are all shared with the tapestry structure.

Why A Different Canvas?

For centuries the tapestry traditions in the West were based on replicating painting, so much so, that the weavers themselves rarely arose above anonymity, leaving the spotlight entirely for the artist who created the original painting. Our field of contemporary tapestry is still strongly branded as merely derivative, and therefore as less artistically significant than original painting, drawing, etc. Little information has been developed and shared with the public to explain how contemporary tapestry art is sufficiently original to be appreciated independently on its own merits.

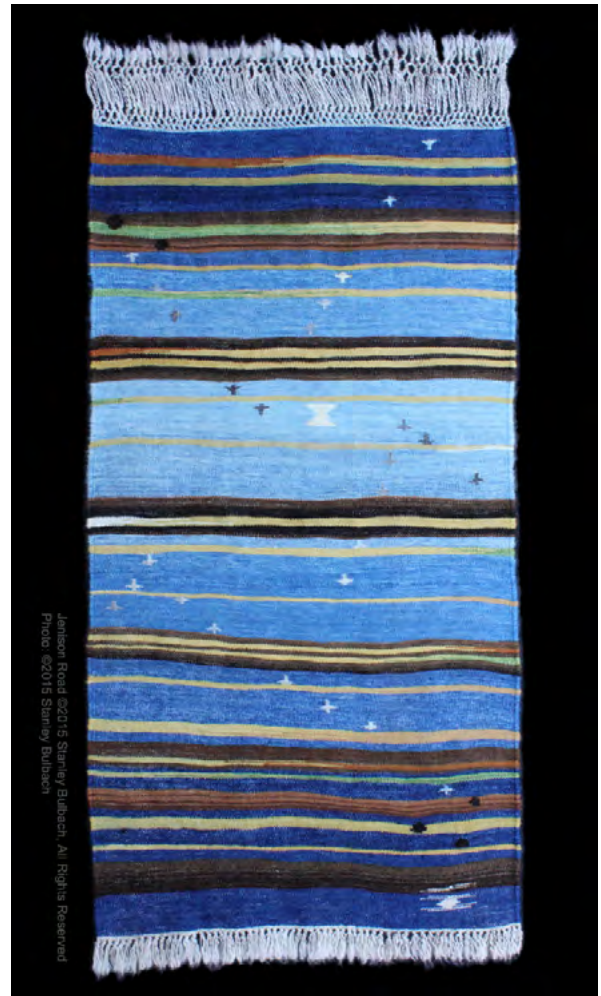
There is sparse explanation presented to explain to today's audiences, markets, and art experts why contemporary tapestry weavers are creating tapestries and not paintings, and why their contemporary tapestry art should be judged and appreciated independently from painting, and valued at least equally.

The unchallenged branding of contemporary tapestry as a derivative art form that is not original harms our field at a time when it is increasingly important to help make our field of contemporary tapestry weaving viable for new generations of young artists.

But whatever we weave and however we choose to weave it, the overarching priority at this time should be to encourage our field of contemporary tapestry to explain to others why we work so diligently to create art in this form. This information is important to help share our appreciation and enjoyment of contemporary tapestry art. This is also essential to ATA's ability to pass our field on to future generations, as indeed it has been so generously passed on to us.



Stanley Walter Bulbach is an artist in New York City who creates his own materials and weaves them into prayer carpets, carpet beds, and flying carpets. His use of the ageless traditional Near Eastern arts for his contemporary "canvas" is strongly influenced by his doctorate from New York University in Ancient Near Eastern Studies and the close connections he finds between our contemporary West and the Near East. For more information, see www.bulbach.com.



Stanley Bulbach, "Jenison Road," a flying carpet, approx. 36 in x 76 in, c 2015. Photo: Stanley Bulbach. Handspun Lincoln Longwool warp and weft, natural wool colors and vegetal dyes.