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Women's Work?

Thoughts on Men and Weaving

[Accepted version of article by Tim Parry-Williams]

As a weaver, and particularly a hand-weaver, I have long been conscious of occupying what is commonly perceived as 'a female terrain' or women's world. It seems that as a man and a weaver, I am an oddity. This is somewhat ironic, as historically, certainly in the modern 'west', the majority of weavers were men, earning the family 'crust' by exercising relative strength and stamina, working long days to produce great volumes of cloth for selling to journeying clothiers. Traditional family and social hierarchies afforded respect to this head of the household while 'weaver' was a very decent occupation in the many textile-based economies.

The 'progress' of the industrial revolution however, brought mechanisation and mass production to the craft of weaving and with this, the particular knowledge (and associated patriarchal seat) shifted away from the cottage to the mill and factory. Here, the esteem of skill, understanding and the capacity to make a living through hand weaving, was now earned by those that successfully managed machines and people. Hand weaving was no longer a valid occupation, certainly not by any modern man and (bar a few material or geographical based exceptions) the specialism became lost amongst the many industrialised processes, its particular significance all-but vanishing. Importing of relatively cheap but fine hand-woven textile goods through the 19th and 20th centuries did perhaps sustain interest and understanding, but (hand-)weaving became firmly associated with hobby and past-time (of non-working and perhaps affluent women), and certainly not serious work (of men). It is perhaps then these historical associations that underpin deeply ingrained gender stereotypes, marking weaving as women's work.

Interestingly in the contemporary mill or factory, the greater proportion of the main workforce is male while the design rooms are far more female oriented. This reflects the scenario in education, where despite the industrial realities, it is almost impossible to attract male students into textiles. The few that do join design courses tend to gravitate towards the broad scope and immediacy of print, with very few selecting weave or knit.

This avoidance trait is maybe due to the discipline itself. Amongst the textile subjects weave requires perhaps the greatest tenacity. By its very nature, it is slow and repetitive, ordinarily requiring logic, patience and a willingness to work systematically. As such, it often divides the crowd, male or female. While professionally, outside industry (with limited directly creative opportunity) survival as a weaver is tough – unless one finds, develops or serves a sustainable niche market that commands high financial returns, hand weaving is an almost impossible career choice. Male and female weavers alike often need to work with industry so that 'production' of goods ensures a sustainable and profitable business model. This latter approach is currently expanding with designer-maker-production weavers (often well-trained women out of art schools) increasing in number, UK exemplars in Wallace & Sewell, or Margo Selby.

Of aesthetics or design sensibility, gender is an interesting vector. It is perhaps common to associate women with the more 'decorative' and men with a more conservative simplicity or contrarily a 'statement' approach to design. In the fashion world there are many numerous exceptions, notable examples in Jil Sander's classic 'masculinity' or Jonathan Saunders' bright colours and materials. Industry often

demands a highly systematic and rational approach so that design aspirations marry well with economic, technical and lead-time agendas. Top industry designers ordinarily need to operate across disciplines and exercise established paradigms in woven textiles in easy fusion with others and this is neither a male or female domain. However, notable male designers of the studio and woven textile industries have often made their mark by bringing and imparting special knowledge, aesthetic or championing particular materials or techniques and exercising a certain focussed approach to weaving. Peter Collingwood (UK, 1922-2008), 'the Innovative master weaver, author and teacher', was famous for his deep inquiry into ethnic textile traditions and re-writing the rules of shaft weaving to create extraordinary pattern and structure, both 2D and 3D. In industry (and amongst a significant number of game-changing innovations), Japan's Junichi Arai pioneered remarkably simple yet sophisticated takes on double-cloth structure, digitising jacquard to deliver complex, patterned layers and employing high-twist yarns to create textured and voluminous fabrics; and German/Polish-born-Japan-based, Jürgen Lehl (1944-2014), was a master of inter-ethnic materials and design sensibility effortlessly exercising ideas like "design repeat beyond the plain of vision", to brilliantly combine industrial efficiency with a luxury aesthetic, commanding a large and loyal following. The 'visible' male weaver then, is often distinct by his art of strategy and lean focus, and not by his gender.

Personally, the journey into becoming a weaver was a very natural one, with progression from a broad interest in art and design and working with the hands, to developing a key interest in surface design. Careful selection of higher education led to the course at Farnham (now UCA), where the very first experiences of working with a loom were magical. The 'machine' and the craft skills it required to work thread into fabric were, and remain, endlessly fascinating and stimulating. As such, gender association was never a deciding factor.

Today, as a somewhat typical portfolio career weaver, based in education, personal projects have bridged a number of approaches. Chiefly however, whether in the studio or the mill, much work is informed by sustained research projects, and an industry-like approach to designing and making, a seeking to be systematic and time-efficient, yet deliver range and diversity. A very recent collection of linen handtowels draws on a continued fascination with refined simplicity and a quietly quirky take on design classics, applying colour-and-weave patterning of the fashion world, to these 'domestic' cloths. The colouring is simple and somewhat seasonal, the result perhaps outside gender characterisation, and the 'product' something that hopefully appeals to both men and women alike.