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Constructing textiles



photo by CLAUDE STOLLER

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Retrospection, though suspected of being the preoccupation of conservators, can also serve as an active agent. As an antidote for the elated sense of progress that seizes us from time to time, it shows our achievements in proper proportion and makes it possible to observe where we have advanced, where not, and where, perhaps, we have even retrogressed. It thus can suggest new areas for experimentation.

When we examine recent progress in cloth-making, we come to the curious realization that the momentous development we find is limited to a closely defined area . . . the creation of new fibres and finishes. While the process of weaving has remained virtually unchanged for uncounted centuries, textile chemistry has brought about far-reaching changes, greater changes perhaps than even those brought about through the fast advance in the mechanics of textile production during the last century. We find the core of textile work, the technique of weaving, yet untouched by our modern age, while swift progress in the wider area has acutely affected the quality as much as the quantity of our fabrics. In fact, while a development around the center has taken place, methods of weaving have not only failed to develop, but some have even been forgotten in the course of time.

It is easy to visualize how intrigued, as much as mystified, a weaver of ancient Peru would be in looking over the textiles of our day. Having been exposed to the greatest culture in the history of textiles and having been himself a contributor to it, he can be considered a fair judge of our achievements. He would marvel, we can imagine, at the mass production at an exceedingly low price, at the uniformity of threads and the accuracy of the weaving; he would enjoy the new yarns used . . . rayon, nylon, cellophane, vinyon, aralac, and fiber-glass, to name some of the most important ones. He would admire the materials that are glazed or water-repellant, crease-resistant, or flame-retarding, mothproof or shrinkage-controlled and those made fluorescent . . . all results of our new finishes. Even our traditionally used fabrics take on new properties when treated with them. He would learn with amazement of the physical as well as of the chemical methods of treating fabrics, which give their tensile strength or their reaction to alkalis or acids. Though our critic is used to a large scale of colors, he may be surprised to see new nuances and often a brilliance hitherto unknown to him, as well as a quantitative use of color surpassing anything he had imagined.

The wonder of this new world of textiles may make our ancient expert feel very humble and may even induce him to consider changing his craft and

taking up chemistry or mechanical engineering, the two major influences in this great development, the one affecting the quality of the working material, and the other the technique of production. But strangely enough, he may find that neither one would serve him in his specific interest: the intricate interlocking of two sets of threads at right angles—weaving. Concentrating his attention now on this particular phase of textile work, he would have a good chance of regaining his self-confidence. A strange monotony would strike him and puzzle him, we imagine, as he looked at millions of yards of fabric woven in the simplest technique. In most cases, he would recognize at one glance the principle of construction, and he would even find most of the more complex weaves familiar to him. In his search for inventiveness in weaving techniques, he would find few, if any, examples to fascinate him; while he himself would feel that he had many suggestions to offer.

An impartial critic of our present civilization would attribute this barrenness in today's weaving to a number of factors. He would point out that an age of machines, substituting more and more mechanisms for handwork, limits in the same measure the versatility of work; he would explain that the process of forming has been broken by divorcing the planning from the making, since a product today is in the hands of many, no longer in the hands of one, each adding mechanically his share to its formation according to a plan beyond his control. Thus the spontaneous shaping of a material has been lost, and the blueprint has taken over. A design on paper, however, cannot take into account the fine surprises of a material and make imaginative use of them. Our critic would point out that this age promotes quantitative standards of value, that as a consequence, durability of materials no longer per se constitutes a value and that preciousness through workmanship, therefore, can no longer be an immediate source of pleasure. Our critic would show that a division between art and craft, or between fine art and manufacture, has taken place under mechanical forms of production, that one carrying almost entirely spiritual and emotional values, the other predominantly practical ones. It is therefore logical that the new development should aim at crystallizing usefulness into pure forms, parallel to the development of art, which in its process of purification has divested itself of a literary by-content and has become abstract.

Though the weight of attention is now given to practical forms, purged of elements belonging

to other modes of thought, esthetic qualities nevertheless flow in naturally and inconspicuously. Avoiding decorative additions, our fabrics today are often beautiful, so we believe, through the clear use of the raw material, bringing out its inherent qualities. Since even solid colors might be seen as an esthetic appendage, hiding the characteristics of a material, we often prefer fabrics in natural, undyed tones.

Our new synthetic fibres, derived from such different sources as coal, casein, soybeans, seaweed or lime have multiplied many times the number of our traditionally used fibres. Our materials therefore, even when woven in the simplest techniques, are widely varied in quality, and the number of variations are still increased through the effects of the new finishes. Yards and yards of plain and useful material, therefore, do not bore us. They give us a unique satisfaction. To a member of an earlier cultivated society, such as our Peruvian, these materials would be lacking in the qualities that would make them meaningful or beautiful.

Though we have succeeded in achieving a great variety of fabrics without much variation of weaving technique, the vast field of weaving itself is open today for experimentation. At present, our industry has no laboratories for such work. The test tube and the slide rule have, so far, taken good care of our progress. Nevertheless, since the art of building a fabric out of threads is still a primary concern to some of us, experimenting has continued. Though not in general admitted to the officialdom of industrial production, some hand-weavers have been trying to draw attention to weaving itself as an integral part of textile work.

At their looms, free from the dictates of a blueprint, these weavers are bringing back the qualities that result from an immediate relation of the working material and the work process. Their fresh and discerning attempts to use surface qualities of weaves are resulting in a new school of textile design. It is largely due to their work that textures are again becoming an element of interest. That our mainly flat, mass-produced fabrics should be enriched by those with plastic qualities resulting from strong textural contrasts is a logical development. Texture effects belong to the very structure of the material and are not superimposed decorative patterns, which at the present have lost our love. Surface treatment of weaving, however, can become as much an ornamental addition as any pattern by an over-use of the qualities that are organically part of the
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LIVING ARCHITECTURE OR INTERNATIONAL STYLE

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Wright in the United States, a Le Corbusier in France, and an Alvar Aalto in Finland (illustration No. 2, 3, 4). They vary ever so much in their form-expression, according to the various regional conditions which their architects have studied and they vary also with regard to the personal peculiarities of their creators. We injure the growth and influence of their work by wrongly classifying it under "The International Style", thus diverting attention from its true aims. Only periods of the past are so definite that they may be classified by the historian as a "style". But a feeble habit of our generation causes us to label prematurely any living movement which is still in the process of growth. Hence the new architecture has been stamped as "The International Style". Genuine new building forms created for specific regional conditions have promptly been imitated in regions where they are out of place. Imitation has become a fatal habit indeed, hard to exterminate. But who can be blamed when education has failed to develop a more profound approach?

So far, we have been exceedingly successful in working out ways of acquainting our young with the achievements of the past by a reproductive and imitative approach, but we are not so successful in stimulating them to come forth with their own creative ideas. We have made them study art history so hard that they have found no time to express their own feelings. By the time they have grown up, they have developed such fixed ideas about what art and architecture are that they have ceased to think of them as something to be freely approached and created by themselves. They have lost the joyful, playful urge of their early youth to shape things into new forms, and they have become instead self-conscious onlookers who all too often withdraw into some remote period of art history because their educational guidance was built up on the mentality of aesthetes rather than of creators.

But the tide has turned. Living architecture has come of age, fighting against heavy odds and constantly on guard against adulteration of its spirit, which is real, organic, and from the earth. Having passed through all the vicissitudes of its developments myself, I know that its scope goes far beyond its technical and scientific aspects. Passion and inspiration as well as scientific thinking have created it. Filled with the delight of a new beauty, of a new aspect towards life, modern architects have rediscovered that man must be the focus, that animation by simple means derived from the natural environment is needed—not aesthetic stunts. A new set of standards in architecture has been born which draws its life from the climate, from the soil, and from the habits of the people. The "International Styles" of by-gone periods, however, are fading fast under the light of this new architectural vision.

CONSTRUCTING TEXTILES

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fabric structure. We can already find this new type of mannerism.

Though it is through the stimulating influence of hand-weaving that the industry is becoming aware of some new textile possibilities, not all hand-weaving today has contributed to it. To have positive results, a work that leads away from the general trend of a period has to overcome certain perplexities. There is a danger of isolationism . . . hand-weavers withdrawing from contemporary problems and burying themselves in weaving recipe books of the past; there is a resentment of an industrial present, which due to a superior technique of manufacture, bypasses them; there is a romantic overestimation of handwork in contrast to machine work and a belief in artificial preservation of a market that is no longer of vital importance.

Crafts have a place today beyond that of a backwoods subsidy or an important therapeutic means. Any craft is potentially art, and as such not under discussion now. Crafts are problematic when they become hybrids of art and usefulness (once a natural union), not quite reaching the level of art and not quite that of clearly defined usefulness. An example is our present day ash-tray art . . . trash.

Modern industry is the new form of the old crafts, and both industry and the crafts should remember their geneological relation. Instead of a feud, they should have a family reunion. Since the weaving craft is making, in an unauthorized manner, its contribution to the new development and is beginning to draw attention to itself, we can look forward to the time when it will be accepted as a vital part of the industrial process.

The influence that hand-weaving has had thus far has been mainly in the treatment of the appearance, the epidermis, of fabrics. The engineer-work of fabric construction, which affects the fundamental characteristics of a material, has barely been considered. It is probably again the task of hand-weavers to work in this direction. For just as silk, a soft material by nature, can become stiff in the form of taffeta through a certain thread construction, and cellophane, a stiff material, can be made soft in another, so an endless number of constructional effects can produce new fabrics. The increasing number of new fibres with new qualities creates a special challenge to try the effects of construction on them. As chemical treatment has produced fluorescence, so structural treatment can produce, for example, sound-absorption. If chemistry has given us water-proof shower curtains, weaving construction can give us dust-repellent drapery or light-reflecting wall materials. Our ancient Peruvian colleague might lose his puzzled expression, seeing us thus set for adventure with threads, adventures that we suspect had been his passion.

Industry should take time off for these experiments in textile construction and, as the easiest practicable solution, incorporate hand-weavers as laboratory workers in its scheme. By including the weaver's imaginative and constructive inventiveness, and his hand-loom with its wide operational scope, progress in textile work may grow from progress in part to a balanced progress.