5-1-1982

Connected Narratives

Judith Geiger

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.rit.edu/theses

Recommended Citation


This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Thesis/Dissertation Collections at RIT Scholar Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses by an authorized administrator of RIT Scholar Works. For more information, please contact ritscholarworks@rit.edu.
CONNECTED NARRATIVES

by

Judith E. Geiger

May, 1982
I, Judith E. Geiger, prefer to be contacted each time a request is made. I can be reached at the following address.

Judith Geiger
1637 Santa Rosa Avenue
Santa Barbara, CA 93109

Date: May, 1982
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Illustrations</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Shipcloths of Sumatra</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Cloth, Culture and Time</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. The Work</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical Appendix</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endnotes</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Word</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Palepai</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Palepai</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Tampan</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Tampan</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Coffee and steam, detail of fig. 7</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Lines and arrows, detail of fig. 7</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Transitions</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Boat, detail of fig. 7</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Plane, detail of fig. 7</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Foot and plane, detail of fig. 7</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Body parts, detail of fig. 7</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Squiggle, detail of fig. 7</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Iguana, detail of fig. 7</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Grid, detail of fig. 7</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Lightning, detail of fig. 7</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Hourglass, detail of fig. 7</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Turtle, detail of fig. 7</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Arrows, detail of fig. 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Self-portrait, detail of fig. 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Deer hunting, detail of fig. 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>West, detail of fig. 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>East, detail of fig. 7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I want to thank Katarina, for getting me into this in the first place; and "Mr. B." and Graham, for helping me to get out.
INTRODUCTION

This work is about transitions, directions and time. When a transition occurs, directions change. Put into the context of a map and compass points, the boundaries for these transitions become North, South, East and West. Dreams, thoughts, memories and time float in and out of the directions. It is an autobiographical record, a sequence of events, a state of mind which comes together into a "Connected Narrative."

The element of time becomes important. Also, the role of textiles in another culture becomes a point for discussion. I have found Indonesian textiles, particularly the shipcloths of Sumatra, as my connection with past traditions. Hopefully, this work will be a continuation of the tradition. Ed Rossbach, referring to the tradition of basketry, states this idea very well:

In basketry we must feel ourselves linked by a common everyday object to our remote antecedents. At a time when the habits, beliefs, and institutions inherited from the past are being destroyed by our technological society, baskets impose a recognition of our own moment as part of history and prehistory, as a continuation of, all natural history.¹
The Sumatran shipcloths and my "Connected Narratives" are both moments as part of history. Not to be so egotistical as to believe that I am making history with my weaving, but more to the fact that I am recording history, my personal history.
SHIPCLOTHS OF SUMATRA

Shipcloths played (they are no longer being woven) an important role in Indonesian culture. They were used in ceremonies dealing with transitions and life-crisis situations such as circumcisions, teeth filings, death and marriage. They "become ritual markers, serving to differentiate ceremonial occasions from everyday routine." What interests me about shipcloths is their narrative quality. Even though I may not know exactly what is being said, I can grasp a sense of story and documentation through the symbolic iconography of these fabrics.

Shipcloths were classified into several categories—palepai, tatibin and tampan. All three were woven in supplementary weft techniques, in which extra weft threads of a contrasting color float over and under the ground cloth of plain weave. All of these cloths had ships as their main design element.

Palepai, the largest of these cloths, measured about three meters long and one meter wide. "The most striking of the cloths bear a single large ship pattern, but others may show two or even four ships." They could only be
used by the high ranking levels of Indonesian society. The palepai was hung on a wall behind the person who was going through a life-crisis ceremony. The cloth became a measure and symbol of one's position in society. Tatiban, like the palepai, were also only used by the aristocracy. The main difference was the size—the tatabin were approximately one meter long.

Tampan were the smallest (no larger than one meter square) and most abundant of the shipcloths. Their use was not class restricted. The imagery combined ships, trees-of-life, humans, birds and overall patterning. The ship, symbol of transition, death and the carrying of souls to an afterlife, was sometimes combined with the tree-of-life, a symbol of fertility and life-force. Tampan were used as gift exchanges during life-crisis or transition ceremonies. Many tampan were exchanged during a wedding. "Large numbers were included in the bride's dowry, and they were used in gift exchanges for such purposes as wrapping small presents of food which were exchanged between the lineages of a bride and groom." This exchange became symbolic of the bonds and ties made by marriage. During other transitional rites, the more tampan one gave as gifts, the more respect one received.
Shipcloths were used "almost always in transitional contexts that may only mark personal changes, but involve and affect the total interrelationships of society: births, circumcisions, marriage, 'political' gatherings, house raisings, the creation of new social units, deaths, etc. Ceremonial foods are exchanged in tampan bundles; brides sit upon them; they crown umbrellas and sacred spears; babies are presented to their grandparents blanketed by them; boys are circumcised while supported by tampan cushions; when corpses are washed before burial, tampan pillow their heads; they wrap the handles of funeral biers, or act as shoulder pads for the bearers; the ridge and corner poles of new houses are capped by tampan; requests for remedies are conveyed to medicine men by tampan petitions; and so forth."12 Because transitional states were so much a part of the Indonesian concept of life, it is no wonder that this was "popular" imagery. The textiles were a mirror of the culture. Shipcloths are still used for ritual functions by some family lines, although this practice is quite rare now as most shipcloths are either in museums or in private collections.13

The ship was a transitional symbol for Indonesian culture. Put into today's western culture, one might represent a state of transition with a plane or space vehicle.
These both have potential for signifying a movement from going beyond "self" to a universal or outer state.

The ship image permeates Indonesian life. It is still believed that the souls of the dead are taken to the "land of souls" by ship.\textsuperscript{14} Tombs and houses can be found that are in the shape of a ship.\textsuperscript{15} Although the ship was originally a symbol of "transition from the world of the living to that of the afterlife", it has gone on to represent "any great change in the stages of a person's life."\textsuperscript{16} The shipcloths are representative of a change. This is where I found my link with historical textiles. These past two years have been so full of transitions, what I consider to be life-crisis situations and changes that shipcloths seemed to be the perfect means to express my feelings, using my own personal imagery.
There is a strong connection between Indonesian textiles and their culture. Textiles are used as a means of communication and documentation. "Since the cloths are often used for ceremonies, as well as for clothing, weaving skills take on an even greater, almost ritual importance. The weaver puts something of her 'spirit' into the cloth, and it is commonly believed that the weaver's character is revealed in the cloth she makes."17

Textiles had such a significant place in Indonesian culture that women had to know how to weave before they were married. "The creation of textiles and childbearing were seen as analogous to man's creative functions in head-hunting and, indeed, certain steps in the preparation of the yarns were called the 'warpath of the women.'"18 Although the weaving was done by women, the tools for weaving were made by men.19

Textiles are representative of the entire belief system. They depict the unity of the upper (sky) and the lower (land and sea) worlds20 and the structuring of the world as male and female.21 Indonesian cultures sees the world as
masculine and feminine. Textiles, the moon and earth are considered feminine while weapons, the sun and heaven are believed to be masculine. When the two come together, as a piece of fabric on a spear, "this becomes a symbol of the Universe as a whole." 22

Textiles were used to represent the cosmic ordering of the Universe. Tampan imagery depicted the relation of Indonesian cultural life within the context of other worlds. They were representative of the connection between the spiritual and the mundane. 23 "Since traditional textiles are the most widespread and representative art form in Indonesia, they are apt examples of the relationship between culture and artisanship. In many ways textiles through their design, motifs and use recapitulate and affirm traditional culture." 24

The connection between cloth and culture goes back to the Neolithic period in which figures were drawn on bark cloth. These "were symbolic or magical in intent, rather than strictly decorative." 25 Already textiles had a function within society. They were believed to have the power to offer protection from evil spirits and sickness. This idea was not just limited to Indonesia or to just textiles, however. In Mexico, retablos--paintings on tin--were created for this same purpose.
Part of what gives traditional textiles their value is the "highly labor-intensive methods" that are used to make the cloths. The techniques used required large amounts of time. "Labor-saving devices for producing traditional cloths would be by definition meaningless. . . . In traditional terms there are no short-cuts to producing a fine textile." In today's mechanized society, traditional methods are disappearing rapidly. Not too many people have the time to spend several years making one piece of fabric unless they are independently wealthy. Our culture is not set up for this kind of activity. It is incompatible with our Western concept of time.

In the 1934 book Technics and Civilizations, Lewis Mumford states:

... the creative life ... is necessarily a social product. It grows with the aid of traditions and techniques maintained and transmitted by society. . . . The addition to this heritage made by any individual, or even by any generation, is . . . small in comparison with the accumulated resources of the past. . . . To treat such activity as egoistic enjoyment or as property is merely to brand it as trivial: for the fact is that creative activity is finally the only important business of mankind.27

Textiles were used to mark levels of wealth, prestige and status within a community. Differences in sex, age and marital status were represented by cloths. There was
a power felt within the fabric, making a connection with the past and the future. "Indonesian textiles reflect the old and the new, change and continuity, deterioration and strength, the indigenous and the foreign. Their threads, colors, designs and uses are a mirror of history, tradition and change."28

You yourself are the time; your senses are your clocks.29

Time is an integral part of historical textiles. Textiles are a way of keeping records. The thought of something taking too long to make is not even considered. I have come to appreciate this way of looking at textiles.

Time is part of the process of weaving.

Time becomes an ingredient; the ... process induces not only meditation and contemplation, but an unusual awareness of time, a measuring of time, a manipulation of time, a celebration, an observation. The units of construction become units of time measured. ... Textile arts become a time experience.30

Time has its effects on textiles. As time passes, traditional design motifs evolve and the original significance of an image becomes separated from its meaning. It comes to a point where the weaver no longer understands what the imagery is about. An example of this is the key and rhomb design in which "it is difficult to make out whether
one is dealing with a purely decorative ornament or a representation of a particular object."

One researcher found that "most people who weave and wear the textiles [today] are not accustomed to talking about the motifs they create and found it odd that we should be interested in what the motifs 'mean'."32

With the changes that occur as a culture evolves with the times, "the social and religious significance of all manner of traditional objects . . . declines."33

Industrialization has had its influence on traditional fabrics. When the tradition behind the cloth is separated from the meaning and original function, it loses its spiritual quality and becomes a commercial product.

Textiles still hold a significant place in Indonesian culture, "but economic and political factors have adversely affected both their quality and use."34 Tampan functioned as a form of currency and when the backing behind the currency lost its support and the customary laws changed, shipcloth weaving declined and finally stopped.35

Time is an arbitrary concept which can be measured by a calendar imposed upon a culture and through language. The measurements are symbols, metaphors for existence. The symbols can take shape in a line, an arrow, letters, numbers, the steam from a cup of coffee.
Fig. 5 Coffee and steam, detail of fig. 7.
Fig. 6 Lines and arrows, detail of fig. 7.
Weaving becomes

an experience in dividing and organizing time, breaking time into modular units, ... units more complex than minutes and seconds, to be arranged in sequences and patterns. [It] might be a sort of clock, not a measuring device, but something devised by man to enforce an awareness, a savoring, of time through its arbitrary division into rhythmic units."

Textiles are time. Each shot of the weft is a rhythmic unit which progresses into a complete sequence.

Often, the first thing someone responds to when looking at textiles is the awe of the time involved in making the piece. At first, this concept of seeing the time and not the work annoyed me (especially in my own work). But I realize now that time and the work are one. If one can see and feel the time, he or she really does understand what textiles are about.
THE WORK

One of my thesis committee people said "Don't think of yourself as a weaver." So far that has not been a problem.

When I came into the Textile program, I never expected to find myself so involved with weaving, least of all doing my thesis work on the loom. Surface design, embroidery and embellishment or felting seemed like the obvious choices. Coming from a painting background and with no weaving experience, I thought non-structural patterns and drawing were all I could deal with. But, after sitting down at a loom all summer and seeing that I could control it and would not have to be controlled (to a certain extent) by the loom, the potential for making patterns and images part of the very structure of the fabric and not just applied pattern to the surface, became apparent.

Using both painting and weaving techniques in this work was a way to combine the two sensibilities. The surface was emphasized with the applied pattern of the dyes to the warp. This was then taken a step beyond by mani-
pulating warp threads individually to make an image. The
problem I created for myself was to have the applied image
and the structural image work together.

A relationship developed between myself, the loom and
the materials. Weaving everyday was like writing an entry
in a diary. As my thoughts (and skills) progressed, there
was an evolution in the imagery. Although I sketched out
on paper what each strip would like, when it came time to
actually weave it, the freedom of the hand-picking some-
times led me to a different image or a variation of what I
had planned. Soetsu Yanagi, in The Unknown Craftsman
says: A pattern thought out on paper is unreliable.
Pattern evolved in the work itself avoids the pitfalls of
paper-thought."37

I totally enjoy the process of weaving. From winding
the warp to threading the heddles, there is something very
meditative about it. Thoughts flowed in and out of my
mind and into the work. The weaving became a record of
these thoughts and feelings. As the Indonesians believe,
part of the maker's spirit is woven into the cloth. I hope
that is apparent in my work.

What started out as series of six strips, grew into
eleven--splicing together two separate but related narra-
tives. It is an implied narrative, enticing one to fit together
the pieces of the puzzle. Each strip becomes a sentence and in their entirety the strips are a paragraph—a "Connected Narrative." The blue strips and the red strips are different levels of ordering. The blue strips deal with transitions, changes of direction and life-crisis situations. The red strips are about time. At times, these levels overlap. I am not trying to reproduce Indonesian shipcloths. It is the spirit of the shipcloths to which I am making reference. (I often feel that my two years of living in Rochester are worthy of having a shipcloth bestowed upon myself.)

All of the images in the strips have specific meanings. The boat represents moving in a new direction; the planes are going back but bringing with them new experiences. The waves are symbolic of the passage of time. The various body parts become metaphors for existence. Numbers, letters, and "squiggles" are systems of ordering and dividing time. The iguana has experienced time and transitions but has remained untouched by them. If asked to do so, every image can be given a definition but I do not feel it is necessary for me to do that. Read as an entire unit, it becomes a pictograph of a personal history—a self-portrait.

This work is a totem of existence and experiences. It means something very specific to me but that does not mean
Fig. 8 Boat, detail of fig. 7.
that it cannot take on a more universal application, also. The viewer can make his own associations.

The blue strips were woven first. The colors of the warp, painted on strip number one, were decided on by the images that went along with a specific section. As the strips progressed, the colors built off of what had come previously, along with taking into consideration the imagery that would accompany that part of the strip.

Although I had a preconceived idea of how the final piece would appear, the work process and the materials led me to a surprise ending. Being aware of and understanding the limitations of process and materials, along with time, was the combination which shaped this work.
CONCLUSION

I see all of this as just a beginning. These past two years have been a transitional period for me. There were many directional changes along the way and my work is a reflection of those changes. I feel very confident in the direction I am now heading.

There is no separation between painting and weaving. The sensibilities are the same but the materials and the processes in fiber lead to a new means of expression. I feel a sense of accomplishment, although I know that I have barely scratched the surface. The tools of the "textile world" have given me new directions in which to work and explore.

It was challenging trying to translate my imagery from surface decoration to a woven image. It has been a natural progression. Surface design (silk paintings) became a way to work out ideas. In a sense, they could be considered sketches--taking ideas and images from the surface and incorporating them into a woven structure.

Felting was another step in this direction. Although the images were applied or "painted" on, the process of
Fig. 21 West detail of fig. 7.

Fig. 22 East detail of fig. 7.
TECHNICAL APPENDIX

This work was done using double weave pick-up. The warp was sett at 24 ends per inch, per layer--or 48 ends per inch. I used 5/2 cotton for the warp and a combination of the cotton and cotton supported lurex for the weft. The warp was painted with Elbetex textile dyes. After the strips were completed, they were steamed for approximately ten minutes to set the dyes.
ENDNOTES


5. Ibid., p. 134.


7. Ibid., p. 88.


9. Ibid.


17. Ibid., p. 76.


20. Ibid., p. 11.


27. Ibid., p. 14.


31. Ibid., p. 39.


34. Ibid.


BIBLIOGRAPHY


"But the most important to one's growth is to see oneself leave the safe ground of accepted conventions and to find oneself alone and self-dependent."