Patterned Rugs

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The College of Fine and Applied Arts
in Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

PATTERNED RUGS

by

Kristin Carlsen Rowley

May 1982
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Date: May, 1982
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Color</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pattern</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illustration</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miniatures</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The House</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concepts</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Technique and Dyes</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Pieces:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Journal&quot;</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Saqqara&quot;</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Ramses&quot;</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Serekh&quot;</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endnotes</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography of Works Cited</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplemental Bibliography</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Journal: Oct. '80 - Jan. '81&quot;</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Saqqara&quot;</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Ramses&quot;</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Serekh&quot;</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
DEDICATION

For B, of course
INTRODUCTION

The most important part of my art, for me, is the creating itself. I find that once the work is done, it no longer interests me except as a piece of history. As other artists of today have said, I feel that the act of creation is my art, and the work of art is the ashes of my art. It is creating in the present that is a motivating force.

My work generally derives from no set pattern, but is improvised as I weave. Therefore one of the purposes of this thesis was to try to set some limits or have some basic pattern to work within, and yet maintain the spontaneity and ability to improvise that is so intrinsically important to me.

There have been several consistently important lines of influence that I am aware of throughout my life. These are: color, pattern, illustrations, miniatures and houses. In one form or another the work of this thesis has pulled these varying lines together. In this written thesis I wish to discuss what each of these influences means to me, the concepts behind the woven pieces, the techniques involved in the weaving, and finally the pieces themselves.
COLOR

One of my early introductions to color came from my father. He sat down with me one day with a box of crayons and demonstrated how a tree trunk did not have to be brown, but could be colored with green, red, blue purple--and still appear natural: that there were many more colors in nature than we are conventionally taught to see. After that I could see color everywhere: white sheets had purple shadows and yellow highlights and clouds overhead were green or blue.

Another "eye-opener" was attending a major ballet when I was about ten. I was old enough to know that blue and green should not be worn together, that purple and yellow were out, and that orange and red were absolutely taboo. So it was with amazement that I saw all of those colors used in the costumes of the dancers, and that they were beautiful together. At that point I threw out all color preconceptions.

About ten years ago I became interested in natural dyes. There was something so basically "honest" about using colors from nature on wool that was also natural. After many experiments I found the colors even more exciting than originally anticipated. In natural colors there exists a subtleness I was not aware of in synthetic dyes. Also, every time yarn was dyed it was a form of discovery, since no two dye baths ever yielded the same color.
Nothing was predictable. It was later that I began weaving with these colors. I found that almost any colors could be put together and not clash. This is because in natural dying there is no such thing as a "pure" color: all of the colors contain some of each of the primaries.

A motivating force in my choice of color has been to see how far I can "push" certain colors. I enjoy taking colors that people generally dislike together, and working with them in order to produce an exciting piece. If colors harmonize too easily, I feel there is no challenge.
Yanni Patsopouslos, in an introduction to a book on Kilims\textsuperscript{1} said:

Pattern is a reflection of order; the translation of the natural and spiritual world by means of shapes which will stimulate the viewer to reconstruct the original forms or ideas from them.

My need to cover surfaces with pattern seems to be as strong as my need to color them. I like pattern that keeps the eye moving endlessly over the surface without becoming bored.

I grew up with oriental rugs upon the floors, and enjoyed walking or driving along their borders or inner pathways with my eyes. Later, medieval manuscript illuminations held me in much the same way. They could be viewed as a whole, or they could be viewed in all the richness of their parts. The illuminated pages from the Book of Kells offered endless subtleness and messages to be discovered in the patterns.

Persian tiles on mosques excited me with their all-over patterns, and patterns juxtaposed against other patterns. The same was true for Persian miniatures with detailed rug patterns placed against unrelated wall patterns, and with clothes patterns and people against intricate calligraphy, that all worked together as a beautiful whole.
Joyce Kozloff, a painter, says, "Pattern making is nonhierarchical. There is no central focus. The viewer is faced with a combination of repetition and variation so that the experience is an ongoing one in time rather than . . . a climax when one 'gets' the work."\(^2\)"

Elaborate patterning or gridwork excites me not just for the visual interest, but because each work represents a tremendous investment of time. It is a fourth dimension placed invisibly into each of these works, and an element I find essential to my own.

My patterns come from a variety of sources: I enjoy the challenge of putting together, as in patchwork, disparate patterns. Rudolf Arnheim in his book, *Entropy and Art*, says that, "Disorder is not the absence of all order, but rather the clash of uncoordinated orders."\(^3\) The challenge for me is to see how uncoordinated the orders of pattern can be but still not bring disorder to the whole.

I use sections of pattern from Morrocan rugs, from Chinese, Danish, or Peruvian embroideries, from European folk weaves or Art Deco pattern books. All of these are based on the grid. At times I call on none of these but simply allow the grid that is inherent in weaving to dictate the pattern. John Perreault, the art critic, says that patterning is likely to have come from weaving as "the lines of warp and weft . . . make up the primordial square or block grid."\(^4\) Another art critic, Joseph Mashek claims that "right angles are appropriate to textile design because they are deducible from the intersection of warp and weft."\(^5\) I enjoy working within the limits of these right angles.
ILLUSTRATION

Illustration is another way of writing. It's purpose is to tell a story or convey a message, but through a different medium. Since it does not always use words, it can sometimes bypass the rational mind and can speak of things that cannot always be said in words. Illustrations have always intrigued me; especially those that have some words mixed in with them. The words speak to one part of the mind, the pictures to another. I don't care if I can even read or understand the words. They represent the magical significance of the picture and are secret messages for the initiated. I find diagrams, maps, instructions on how to construct something, all have this same appeal.

Egyptian hieroglyphs were both illustrations and calligraphy all in one. Egyptian art itself was concerned with the descriptive clarity of artistic forms. This was because the Egyptians were interested in the magical significance and traditional meaning of these forms. Art was a conventionalized language in which there was a rigid dependence upon established usage in order to preserve the overwhelming importance of the idea. E. Baldwin Smith, who wrote about Egyptian architecture, said that Egyptian art was conceptual rather than sensuous. This repetition of forms, styles, and ideas, with small changes over time, has influenced me.
"Miniature is one of the refuges of greatness," said Gaston Bachelard, the poet philosopher. A miniature is anything created on a smaller scale than is usual. As I write this I sit surrounded by dollhouses that I have built filled with intricate furniture, chandeliers, and musical instruments with inlaid mother-of-pearl all done on a scale of one inch to one foot. But why they are necessary to me is hard to say.

I think it's the ability to see the world in a grain of sand, as William Blake put it. Or to say it another way, to see the macro-cosm in the microcosm. Bachelard says, "The cleverer I am at miniaturizing the world, the better I possess it."

Whatever it is, all miniatures represent a tremendous investment of time not commensurate with their scale. While my work is not miniature in scale, somehow the process is. Often, weaving across just one line in one of my works can involve the moving of over one hundred separate threads in close proximity to each other. This creates a real intimacy between my work and myself. It is an intimacy similar to a miniature room, and an intimacy that comes from having hand moved every thread, every color, every design myself with each thread representing a moment of time in my life.
THE HOUSE

The house has been a consistently important symbol for me and a recurring one that appears in my dreams. Mystics have considered the feminine aspect of the universe as a house. This is most likely because the house, like a womb, "contains" people. It is also possibly because women traditionally spend so much time within them. The arrangement and display of the house is considered within the woman's domain.

The image of the house can also be used in relation to the human psyche. J.E. Cirlot in his Dictionary of Symbols writes:

The outside of the house signifies the outward appearance of man: his personality or his mask. The various floors are related to the vertical and spatial symbols. The roof and upper floor correspond to the head and the mind, as well as to the conscious exercise of the self-control. Similarly, the basement corresponds to the unconscious and the instincts... the kitchen, since this is where foodstuff is transformed, sometimes signifies the place or the moment of psychic transmutation in the alchemical sense. The intercommunicating rooms speak for themselves. The stairs are the link between the various planes of the psyche... The house has thus been used as a tool for analysis of the human soul. Gaston Bachelard says, "Our soul is an abode. And by remembering 'houses' and 'rooms' we learn to 'abide' within ourselves."
Paul Oliver, the architect, says that man needs an environment of meaningful forms, which is the house. Olivier Marc, the French architect, sees these forms as being contained within the geometric shapes of the circle (for the cosmos or God), the square (which represents man) and the triangle (of aspiration). Underlying all of these, in the house form, is the cross. The vertical of the cross is expressed in stairways, towers, slanting roofs and the horizontal in the enclosing walls, corridors, tunnels and spread of the building. Since the circle was the symbol of the cosmos and square of man, Marc says, "The circle was discarded as the basic form of the house in those cultures where individualism began to assert itself."
CONCEPTS

The first of my four thesis pieces was woven in the way I am accustomed to working: there was no set design planned out in advance, but rather some general concepts that I wished to work with. But, as one of the purposes of this thesis work was to set limits that I could work within, or to create a basic pattern that would still permit improvisation, I began to do some research. I studied traditional Persian rugs and discovered a design that delighted me tremendously: the Persian "Garden Rug." These rugs were strongly geometric renderings of the layout of a Persian garden. (According to Kurt Erdmann, our word "paradise" comes from the Persian for garden.15) There on one rug were all the pathways, the lily-ponds, the canals, the trees with birds and the flower beds. It's appeal for me lay in several directions. The strong use of geometrics--the flowing arabesque is not part of this design, but rather the hard edged right angle--appealed to my desire for truth in the process of weaving. The fact that the design was based on a real garden appealed to my love of illustration. The ability to change scales so as to wander the pathways and through the gardens appealed to my love of miniaturization. And the color and patterning was wonderful! But for me, a stronger symbol has always been the house or building. Thus I decided to create a series of "building" rugs. I began a search for house or building
plans that were significant to me. As has happened so often before, I found myself drawn to Egyptian architecture. E. Baldwin Smith says that the ancient Egyptians were "concerned with the descriptive clarity of their artistic forms because of their interest in the magical significance and traditional meaning of those forms." In other words, they were a form of communication for the initiated. And Jean-Louis De·Cenival writes in his book on Egyptian architecture: "The Egyptian temple was a machine for maintaining and developing divine energy." These buildings were magic places and symbolic of that magic in their forms. And it was these forms that I used as the basis for three of my thesis works.
The technique and dyes

The technique used in all four pieces is traditional flatweave tapestry using the dovetail joint. The method of joining was picked for several reasons. I use it as a method of counting so that there is a consistent number of "picks" in each motif. I also feel it becomes an important part of the design, and I like its obvious reference to the fact that each of these pieces was woven.

The warps in all of these pieces are a linen rug warp picked for its strength. The sett was six ends per inch. The weft employed was a two ply wool, picked for its fineness, strength, and availability.

The dyes were all natural dyes, using mordants of alum, tin, iron, chrome and copper. A mordant is a chemical used to open the fibers of the wool and make the subsequent dyes fast. Sometimes the mordant itself was used as the color, especially in the piece RAMSES, where the blue-green color came from a combination of cupric-sulphate, urea and ammonia. (The ancients achieved that color by soaking copper filings in urine.)

Traditional methods of dying were used: the yarn was first mordanted. The dye was made by boiling the plant or animal material. Then the yarn to be dyed was introduced into the dye bath.

As I have built up quite a stock of naturally dyed yarn over the years, it was only necessary to dye only five or six additional
colors for each piece so as to have a quantity of one or two base colors. The finishes all consisted of the Damascus Edge, as shown in Peter Collingwood's book on rug weaving, with the resulting fringe either sewn back in or left loose. It is conceptually important to me that the warp be obvious, and apparent, as I want the beholder never to forget that this is a weaving based on warp and weft.

The ends of yarn, where a color begins or ends, have been left loose on the back, as sewing them in could distort the design and leaving them loose adds protective padding. These pieces are intended to be either rugs or wall pieces, as the owner desires.
THE PIECES

JOURNAL: OCT.'80-JAN.'81

This piece was created in my accustomed manner. There was no set design that I was following, only ideas. The weaving can be read from the bottom, where I began to weave, to the top, and is a document of that period of my life. I had been looking at Paul Klee's notebooks and was fascinated by his experiments with vertical and horizontal lines. I decided in this weaving to set myself the limitation of using vertical and horizontal stripes divided by white blocks that formed a diagonal. The other limitation was in the use of thrums for the weft. Thrums are the little bits of yarn left over from previous weavings. I wanted to see if I could use color randomly, more or less, and still have the piece work as a whole.

Very soon after the weaving commenced, a red vertical stripe developed a life of its own—it was too strong to remain part of the pack—and to balance this a blue horizontal stripe eventually wandered off. I had originally determined to have a narrow border of green on the right, but no border on the left. I never consider original decisions as binding, though. Thus, within the green border on the right, designs began to appear, and the wandering blue line at times acted as a border on the left. At some point the blue line on the left moved over to reveal another pattern that was still based on verticals and horizontals, but no longer stripes. I
saw this as a window through the piece. Meanwhile the white dividing blocks arrived at the right edge of the piece. The most obvious solution was to move them back to the left, but I didn't want a tame diagonal anymore. I wanted a rip across this weaving. So the white became a wider, jagged tear across the piece. Another tear or rent appeared in the fabric in the upper right revealing a completely different pattern behind this time: a traditional rug design.

Once the white rip reached the left side it was time to move it back once more. (The length of the piece seemed to dictate this.) I decided to allow the white to start to obliterate the design. I did away with the horizontal stripes, and suddenly "smeared" the vertical stripes. Thus the piece ends. But through the whole piece wanders the red line: the viewer's pathway from the bottom to the top, and my way out.
SAQQARA

This was the first weaving in the series based on Egyptian architecture. The floor plan of the stepped pyramid at Saqqara was picked for its interesting spatial break up, as well as for my interest in it being the first of the pyramids in Egypt.

I made some color decisions in the beginning: all the heavy black lines in the floor plan would be represented by red and navy checks in the weaving, and all the grayed areas would be gray and blue stripes. These stripes combined on the right edge to create a ladder through the piece. Also very early on I decided that the beige color in the bottom border would represent both a way in and a pathway through and out of the weaving. After that, decisions occurred as the weaving progressed. I conceived of some rooms as being "carpeted" but I enjoyed playing with a confusion of scales. I did not want these rooms to be perceived as literal rooms. In the patterned area on the lower left side I even switched scales in the rug design within the room itself.

Color and pattern decisions were made in relation to what was visible on the loom, as once a section of cloth passed over the breast beam it was lost from sight. I was unable to view my work as a whole at any time. Thus some parts work better than others in regard to the whole. The patterned section in the upper right is perhaps not quite right as to scale and color in relation to the other patterns, but I enjoy the sense of complexity it adds to the rug.
With natural dyes it is impossible to get the exact same color from one dye bath to another. Therefore in antique Oriental rugs it is not uncommon to see a subtle color change where one dye lot of yarn has run out and another begins. I enjoy making direct references to these color changes by purposely adding a color of a slightly changed or faded value. Also throughout the rug are references to occurrences in my life at the time, so this rug maintains its journalistic value.

The rug ends with both the entrance of the large beige color, and the dual ending of the beige path. Thus it is always possible to enter and leave this rug visually.
RAMSES

Ramses said, "I made for thee an august house of millions of years, abiding upon the mountain of 'Lord-of-Life.'" Ramses was the second rug in the Egyptian architecture series. It is based on the floor plan of the mortuary temple of Ramses III. The initial color decisions were: all the black borders in the diagram would be black in the weaving, bordered by red where possible. The third basic border color would be a strange tint of green that the ancients achieved by soaking copper filings in urine, but which I arrived at by using cupric sulfate with urea and ammonia. The color was one that, in conjunction with the other two, repulsed many people. It was not an easy color to work with, but I decided to give it dominance throughout the piece. I also decided to not use any of the rug or embroidery patterns as in the past. Each room would be represented by a solid color, or at the most be broken with stripes or squares. Therefore there is much more of a "stained-glass" effect in this piece and the color appears quite brilliant.

I decided to stay within a definite range and limited number of colors for the interiors of the rooms. This meant there were fewer problems in holding this piece together as far as color was concerned. The fact that I could not look back at the previously woven sections had less importance. But because of the "safeness" of color and design, this weaving was less interesting to create for me.
I feel this piece would be more successful if it were much larger: if what is here seen could be but a middle section of a rug with many large borders.
SEREKH

This is the last in the series of Egyptian architectural pieces. It is based on a Serekh facade which is a palace facade painted on the walls of a tomb or temple. This is a representation of the dado decoration on the tomb of Queen Tyi of the XVIII Dynasty.

This piece represents a change from my normal way of working. Almost all color and design decisions were made before the actual weaving began, with only the small rectangles allowing room for improvisation. Even the elongated legs of one of the off-white motifs were planned in advance, as well as the number of motifs.

I was drawn to this design because of its simplicity, its Egyptian expressiveness, and by the heavy border on the one side and the lack of border on the other. These borders and lack thereof gave the feeling that the pattern was capable of falling off one side of the weaving. It is important to keep in mind that this piece was woven vertically with the right side of the piece representing the bottom of the weaving on the loom, and the left side the top. Normally I insist my weaving be hung in the direction they appeared to me on the loom. But this weaving took on a life of its own and thus came to be hung sideways. I decided that each rectangle would enclose a different pattern based on block units of two warp threads. Later, when it became apparent that I might not have enough of the background blue to finish the piece, I added a few stripes of a different blue. This also refers to the changes of color
in Oriental rugs. The gold lines are present because I found it impossible to follow an absolutely predictable design.

On the whole, I feel this piece is the strongest of my works.
CONCLUSIONS

In looking back over my thesis work I can see a definite change. My first weaving, JOURNAL, represents an almost total lack of pre-planning as far as design and color were concerned. My last weaving, SEREKH, was almost completely structured and planned in advance. I am aware that my last weaving represents a stronger design and concept. It is much more unified as a whole. Thus it makes a clearer statement than my first weaving. This creates a difficult problem for me.

Improvisational weaving seems to be a real need for me. Perhaps it's the intimacy that occurs with the piece as it develops out of my life. Perhaps it's a quality of "story-telling" that I enjoy so much, especially as the ending is unknown until it's told. Perhaps it's being allowed so much time to make design decisions, and being able to change easily from the original concept that appeals. Whatever it is, I am not sure that I can work without it.

On the other hand, in looking at the finished weavings, it is clear to me that the most successful piece is the one that developed out of the greatest amount of advance planning.

Therefore, in the future I see myself continuing to weave, for awhile, within the limitations of floor plans that have meaning to me. I also see myself experimenting some more with pieces that are almost entirely planned in advance. But I know that in between doing
these two things I will have the need to go back to weavings that are pure improvisations: that allow me to talk to myself personally about myself. Perhaps from these journalistic weavings can come ideas and designs for the planned work.
ENDNOTES


8 Ibid., p. 150.


10 Ibid.

11 Bachelard, Poetics of Space, p. xxxiii.


14 Ibid., p. 54.


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