

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Textile Society of America Symposium
Proceedings

Textile Society of America

1998

Drawing on Tradition

Cynthia Schira

Rhode Island School of Design

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf>



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#)

Schira, Cynthia, "Drawing on Tradition" (1998). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 204.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/204>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Drawing on Tradition

Cynthia Schira, Lawrence, Kansas

Over the forty years that I have been weaving, my work has changed conceptually and technically. In the late fifties, after studying in Aubusson, I worked in the tapestry technique. What I perceived to be a rigidity within the working process pushed me toward investigating ways of incorporating the spontaneity of the painters of that period into my textile art. The integration of resist-dyeing along with the use of supplementary wefts provided the potential for changes and additions during the weaving process that I sought. The imagery on my work then was formed by and contained within the supplementary wefts. Eventually I became interested in integrating the images into the base cloth - no longer treating them as an addition and using more specific pictorial images.

In order to accomplish this change, I felt that I needed more technical information. I travelled from Kansas to the Cooper-Hewitt in New York to study textile analysis with Milton Sondag. He taught me how to analyze samples of drawloom cloth - how to see textile structures in a completely different way than I had as a handweaver. My idea was to translate the drawloom structures I saw at the museum into weaves that I could use on my 12-harness loom in my studio. Before I had time to adapt these drawloom structures to my floorloom, I received an NEA (National Endowment for the Arts) grant that allowed me to purchase a large, 72-inch wide, 32-harness, computerized loom. Obviously the translation of the drawloom structures was more feasible on my new loom. After a period of experimentation and learning, I began the work which involved me over a decade.

The triple weave compound structures I developed on the new loom allowed me to focus on the integration of structure and image with the intent of rendering them physically and visually inseparable. I used three separate warps. Each varied from the other in yarn size, yarn type, and the ends per inch. I painted different designs with dye on each warp. I extended the potential for decision making during the weaving process by the use of multiple wefts of different sizes, textures, and colors. I wanted the layers to all weave continuously, interconnected by discontinuous wefts. I planned that one warp layer would have dominance within each image shape while traces of the other two layers would remain. I used the weft in the design shape area to emphasize, disguise, or blend with the warp pattern. My triple weave ideas were possible on my new loom. Without the multiplicity of harnesses and the computerization of tie-up and sequencing changes, the

task would have been too onerous for the retention of sanity.

I continued my triple weaves but a desire to use more specific imagery as well as my participation in several Jacquard loom projects, changed a passing interest in the Jacquard into my major textile involvement. The Jacquard loom was not new to me. While I was a student at Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in the late 50s, I took a Jacquard course. I made a design on point paper, cut my cards, laced them, attached them to the loom and, with the help of a technician, wove a yard of fabric. Many years later I participated in a Jacquard project, again at RISD, in which ten visiting artists were invited to design and weave "one-off" fabrics. I found working on the Jacquard loom so interesting that I returned twice after the course of the project. Eventually, my enthusiasm was dampened by the time necessary to complete the point paper and the impracticability of making changes once the weaving process began.

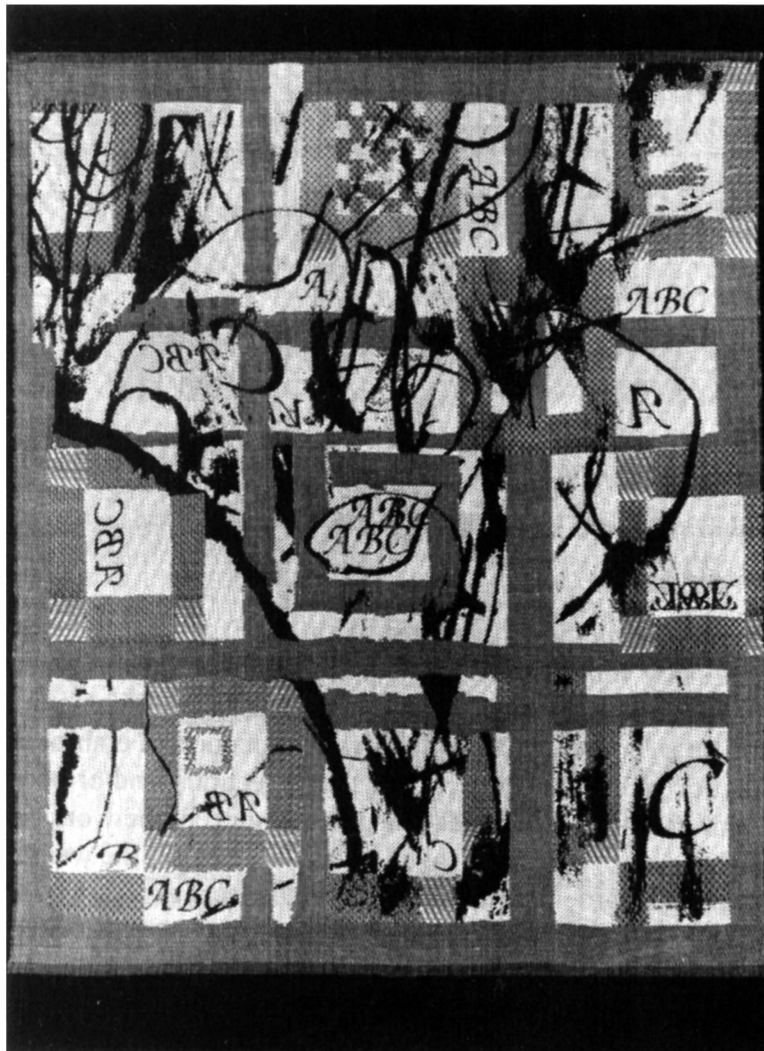
I participated in a second project. This one was organized by Beatrijs Sterk editor of *Textilforum* magazine at the Muller Zell Company in Zell, Germany. Sterk invited five artists to work at the commercial mill for three weeks on computerized Jacquard looms which used the Grosse system. The Grosse system, a dedicated networked computer program, eliminated everything that had been restrictive in designing for the traditional Jacquard loom. Designs could be scanned into the system and edited (parts added, deleted, or changed) quickly. Then the technical information was added by a specialized employee of the mill and the disc taken to the loom. If the results were not satisfactory, the disc could be returned to the computer for more work. I found working with this system incredibly exciting. The Muller Zell Mill project was followed several years later by another project at the Philadelphia College of Textiles and Science under the direction of Bhaki Ziek. There I used the EAT, another dedicated CAD system. In each of these projects I worked with a technician or grad student on a dedicated computer system. Unfortunately, I was not able to replicate the experience in my Kansas studio without the technical assistance the projects had provided and without the specialized equipment.

At the CITDA (Computer Aided Textile Design Association) conference in 1994 I saw a new industrial CAD system demonstrated on a Macintosh computer. The system is JacqCAD and fits on a computer being used for other functions. Although the program is for industry and very expensive, the President of the company believes in making the system available for a nominal fee to art schools and universities with textile programs "for the next generation of designers". I obtained a JacqCAD system for my department at the University of Kansas. I realized that if I were to teach students to use the system, I had to completely master it myself. Thus started my obsession with the possibilities of weaving on a computerized Jacquard.

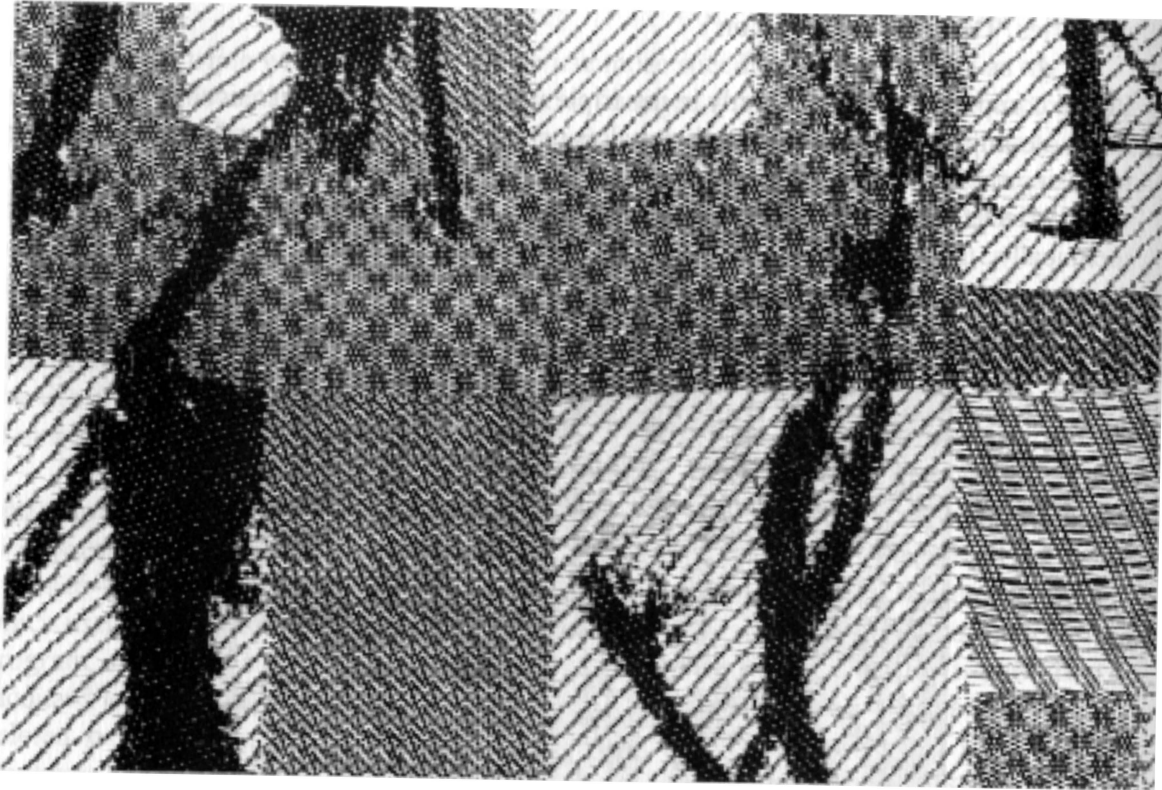
My obsession was fueled by discovering CMACT, the wonderful textile structure school in Montreal, Canada, directed by Louise Lemieux-Bérubé. The school has a computerized TIS Jacquard handloom. On this loom it is possible to weave fabric with no repeats across the entire 42 inch width. The use of the loom is available on a daily rental basis and my students' work can be designed in Kansas and woven at CMACT. I have been going

to the school regularly for 4 years to weave experiments, individual pieces, and recently my series "Drawing on Tradition".

I used compound weaves directly in my triple weave work. Now, ironically, when I am using a computer and a program that makes using compound weaves relatively easy, I am not using them. Presently, I want the juxtaposed simple weaves to give a compound visual effect to the viewer. I am using the compound weaves conceptually rather than technically. Technology has given me the freedom to explore this new path without an outrageous time commitment.



"ABC Drawn Quilt" by Cynthia Schira , photo by Luke Jordan



Detail of "ABC Drawn Quilt", by Cynthia Schira, photo by Luke Jordan

The series "Drawing on Tradition", has three parts. The first part focuses on the indigenous textile quality within continuously patterned cloth. It uses repeat patterning as a visual metaphor for the varying cyclic and repetitive aspects of life/nature. After weaving the fabric on a Jacquard, I annotate it with appliqué and embroidery. The forms and lines of annotation refer to the interruptions, intersections, and/or occurrences that mark the continuum of life. Before the detailing is recognized, the works appear as lengths of repeat patterned yardage. The physical qualities of the cloth, the weight and texture of the imagery on the textile, are important to the overall visual expression.

The second part of the series refers literally and figuratively to the title, "Drawing on Tradition". Figuratively I utilize images/patterns found in functional cloth of varying periods - a plaid, a stripe, a flower, a check - and then draw with other weaves on that image, joining the reference to "patterned cloth" with a fine art gestural drawing to speak of the tradition of each and the relationship between the two. The pieces continue to be large - 3 1/2 feet wide by 5, 7, 8, or 9 feet high. This work would not be possible without the TIS loom.

The third part of the series is a group of miniatures which compliments the larger works

by isolating and elaborating fragments or parts of the larger textiles. I think of these works as sketches. I hand embroider the images on these textiles.

I plan to introduce a small amount of color as well as reintroduce many of the compound weaves that I used in my former work in the near future. I continue to be totally immersed in the potentials of my textile art and search for technologies that will make my ideas possible.

1. Irene Emery, *The Primary Structure of Fabrics* (Washington, D.C.: The Textile Museum, 1980), 140.
2. Xia Nai, *Jade and Silk of Han China, The Franklin D. Murphy Lectures, III*, trans. and ed. Chu-tsing (Kansas City: Helen Foresman Spencer Museum of Art, 1983), 51.
3. Mark Newport, "The Future is Past," *Fiberarts* Vol.25, No.2 (1998): 53.