

Weaving

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In Colonial times, many men were weavers. Women who never married did much of the spinning. This is where the term spinsters originated.

Weaving

A method of producing cloth or material by crossing two sets of thread perpendicular to each other. The dictionary defines a loom as “a frame or machine for interweaving yarn or threads into a fabric, the operation being performed by laying lengthwise a series called the warp and weaving in across this other threads called the weft, woof, or filling.”

History

A recent archeological discovery has placed the origin of weaving at more than 24,850 years ago. Due to the hazards of climate, insects, and fire, very few early fabrics have survived. However, archeologists have found some examples of early textiles and weaving tools.

Archeologists believe that basketmaking and weaving were probably the first “crafts” developed by humans. Weaving probably evolved in the quest for the basic needs of food, shelter, and clothing.

Archeological research indicates that cultures on every continent devised crude looms and methods of weaving. Perhaps they realized the possibilities of weaving after watching spiders spinning a web, birds building a nest, or beavers building a dam.

Once early civilizations learned ways of creating a woven structure, people could make many items such as rugs, blankets, curtains, purses, body coverings, fish netting, hut coverings, food containers, and infant carriers. After learning survival techniques, humans next wanted to embellish the objects they created. Human beings have a natural, strong desire to be creative.

Weaving in America

When the first European settlers came to America, they brought with them a type of loom that had been used in Europe since before the 1300s. It was a horizontal frame loom, one that hand-weavers still use today.

In the South, plantation owners built weaving shops where slaves and servants produced cloth for bed ticking and garments. A few estates even began turning out elegant silks

and fine linens. Because textiles were of little value compared to tobacco, most planters preferred to import cloth from England.

Since New Englanders could grow neither tobacco nor an equivalent crop to trade, they relied almost exclusively on weavers for their cloth. Many an impoverished Englishman earned passage to New England by indenturing himself as an apprentice weaver. Many prospered and became wealthy.

Most rural settlers had to weave for themselves. Through the 18th century, all members of the family learned to weave, although women did most of it. Some men traveled from farm to farm with a loom (a barn loom) in the back of their wagon. The farm women gave them their rags to be woven into rag rugs.

Most of the cloth produced in colonial times was simple and sturdy. Plain woven wool and linen were used for clothing. A homespun fabric was made from tow, left over after making linen. Linsey-woolsey, which had a linen

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Weaving in America *(continued)*

warp and a woolen weft, was often made into beautiful coverlets. Hope chests of brides-to-be were filled with finely woven bed linens, towels, and curtains.

It was difficult to produce fine fabric with straight selvages and evenly spaced weft. Similar to knitting, one achieved an even tension after years of practice and patience. Good weavers were proud of their work.

During the 1800s, the Shaker sect became quite well known for their multicolored rag carpets. However, the Shaker doctrine of simplicity, known as the Millennial Laws, included guidelines for weavers in 1840. Two rules concerning a dwelling's furnishings forbade checks, stripes, or flowers on bedspreads and window curtains.

The Navajo Indians, who learned a weaving skill from the Pueblo Indians, have for more than 400 years created special weaving patterns for rugs and blankets that have been given as gifts and sought by art collectors.

Today, oriental rugs are still prized by many collectors and have become treasured heirlooms.

Textile production went through profound changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century. At the beginning of the century in America, weaving was still done by hand, both commercially and at home. Most professional weavers were men who did their work for sale. Women wove items at home for family use.

By the end of the 19th century, weavers were simply mill workers who tended several water- or steam-powered looms at a time. The increased speed of production brought more textiles to the average farmhouse and rendered most hand-weaving obsolete.

At the end the 20th century, many weaving mills were moved to foreign countries where labor costs were considerably less. With further computerization of weaving machines, labor costs have been cut even more. Because of industrialization, it is cheaper to buy ready-made woven items than it is to produce them at home today.

Weaving today

Hand-weaving today is both a hobby and an industry. Many production weavers today create tapestries and other materials used to decorate buildings and homes. They speak of experiencing a joy as they watch a complicated pattern grow into a work of art.

Many hand-weavers also weave fabrics for beautiful garments. These are definitely a true luxury—a one-of-a-kind item made by skilled craftsmen who carry on past traditions.



Weaving—like quilting, basket making, and landscape painting—has become a respected art. Many of these works of art become family heirlooms passed down from generation to generation as nondeeded property. Linsey-woolsey coverlets (made from wool weft and linen warp) woven in intricate patterns have long been prized family possessions. Today's fine-woven, handmade pieces may be just as prized tomorrow.

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