



Madelyn van der Hoogt's Weaving II: Pushing Rusty Brains Down New Avenues of Thought

BY TOBY SMITH

A friend of mine has been a weaver for 25 years, teaches weaving, yet still calls herself just an advanced beginner. Most curious, I thought. But after weaving seven years, taking nineteen weaving workshops and reading everything I can find about weaving, I get it. I can dress my 8-shaft jack loom easily and read most drafts. I can design my own weaving within limitations and enjoy satisfaction at a competent product. But in my inner being, I do not really comprehend the mysteries of draft theory. I fake it. I am even so foolishly bold as to teach weaving. However, I was at a stage where I felt blocked by that vast wasteland which is my ignorance.

I have attended many wonderful and inspiring workshops with experienced and knowledgeable instructors in Canada, the United States and Norway. Each of these workshops contained some theory, although not enough to scare anyone

Above: Classes are always at capacity due to Madelyn van der Hoogt's stature in the weaving world.

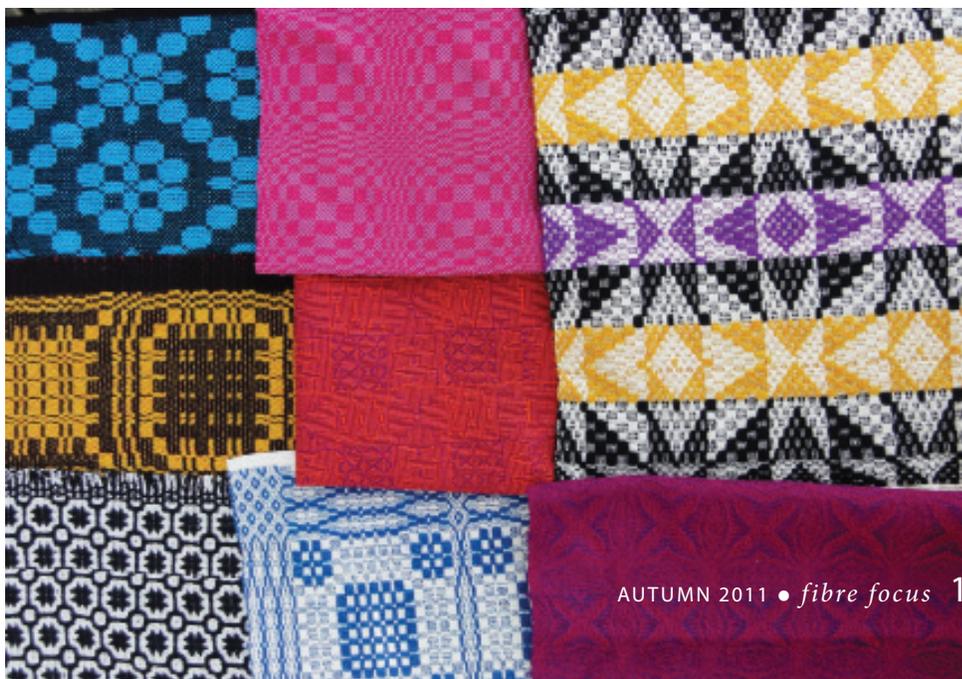
Right: Although I came away with the most gorgeous samples I have ever woven, the purpose of the course is the advancement of a weaver's theoretical knowledge so that she can design, invent, analyse, adapt and manipulate weaving samples and weaving in her own textile practice. *Photography by Toby Smith*

off. Still, there are few places to study weave theory. And so, determined in my search for greater weaving knowledge, I enrolled in Madelyn van der Hoogt's five day block weaving course, *Weaving II*, at The Weavers' School in Coupeville, Washington.

A village sitting on the water's edge, Coupeville has some wonderfully preserved Queen Anne and Victorian houses, some of which offer bed and breakfast accommodation. We came from California, North Carolina, Bangkok, Rhode Island and Vancouver, B.C.

This geographical range is common at the school where all the classes are at capacity due to Madelyn's stature in the weaving world and the resurgence of weaving as an aesthetic pastime.

The Weavers' School fits comfortably into what could be three house basements all put together. There are over twenty 8-shaft Baby Wolfs, two computerized looms, two counter-marche, two draw looms, and assorted multi-shaft table looms. The school consists of five rooms: two weaving studios, a classroom with library and shelves of samples, a





One of the two weaving studios at The Weavers' School. The school has over twenty 8-shaft Baby Wolves, two computerized looms, two counter-marche, two draw looms, and assorted multi-shaft table looms.

Madelyn van der Hoogt, editor of *Handwoven* magazine, author of *The Complete Book of Drafting* and editor of many books of weaving projects. She was also an editor of *Weaver's* magazine for its entire duration before coming to *Handwoven*. Madelyn first learned to weave on a backstrap loom in Guatemala in the 1970s. In 1984 she started The Weavers' School, originally located in rural Missouri. In 1993 it moved to Coupeville. She also taught high school English for fifteen years after graduating with a degree in English from University of California, Berkeley.

Suzie Liles is to Madelyn what Robin is to Batman. Suzie has a Masters in Fine Arts in Fibers, taught weaving at the university level and is now one of the owners of the Eugene Textile Center

in Eugene, Oregon (www.eugenetextilcenter.com). She has been a part of The Weavers' School for sixteen years, first as a student and more recently as Studio Director and assistant teacher.

Weaving II is not a workshop. The goal is not just to learn how to reproduce more lovely pieces of fabric, although I came away with the most gorgeous samples I have ever woven and that could easily be enough on its own. The purpose of the course known innocently as *Weaving II* is the advancement of a weaver's theoretical knowledge so that she can design, invent, analyse, adapt and manipulate weaving samples and weaving in her own textile practice. To achieve this, she must be willing to engage with challenging intellectual abstractions. Indeed, an engineer or an architect would have a

distinct advantage here. It is hard enough to make a rocket scientist cry, yet rocket science is like making toast compared to the intellectual banquet weaving theory serves up.

Perhaps I exaggerate. Most students are women from a period when they were directed into secretarial school or elementary teaching, so most do not have the sort of intellectual training that would be most conducive to this kind of structural thinking. However, thoughtful weaving experience and some good reading can help in understanding the vocabulary, abstractions and mental gymnastics of *Weaving II*. Acquiring this deeper understanding of the architecture of weaving broadens our structural knowledge giving more scope for design. Mini-lectures on computer drafting, huck design, copyright issues and network drafting are also offered for anyone interested in those niches.

Weaving II is primarily about blocks: how to draft them, how to analyse them, how to apply the theory and how to weave them. Learning about profile drafts is an integral part of this. Madelyn is a brilliant teacher. Although articulate, she speaks quickly and there is some complicated material to cover in five days. However, even if students were to understand only fifty percent of what is offered in this course, they would feel that they had moved some distance along the road to understanding the mysteries of our craft. It was an enormous relief when Madelyn periodically reminded us that this is very difficult material and we should not feel as though we ought to understand it all. Or to quote Madelyn, "You don't know anything unless you make the effort to learn it. You can't

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believe how many ways there are to torture your mind in weaving.” It takes years to develop a full understanding of weaving theory. Madelyn never allowed us to feel as though it were our own intellectual limitations that prevented us from understanding it. “It is a concrete, learnable reality,” she would remind us. It also helps that Madelyn is hysterically funny, seeing the irony in everything and often telling stories where she is the butt of the humour. This combination of challenge, encouragement, and humour drew us along a difficult learning track like a coal train grinding uphill in a snowstorm: slow, halting, but forward none the less. I still feel like I am in the snowstorm, but I know spring will come.

One day, Madelyn presented a slide lecture illustrating various weave structures. While it looks like there are a million varieties, in fact most are derivatives of just three categories of structure: plain weave, twill, and block. In her lectures, Madelyn would often create draft illustrations on the board to clarify things. Sometimes I would get confused and could not sort out whether they were several illustrations of the same point or were all different things. However, she continually warned us not to over think it. “Whatever you want to do is easier than you think, but it is horrible to talk about it.” Three times during the week we received drafts, explanatory texts, profiles, etc. and at the end of the week, they were all spiral bound for each of us along with our notes.

Class time was 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. We had lectures for two hours in the morning and then usually another hour in the afternoon. Otherwise, we were at the looms. Most days the Canadian contingent came in at 8:30 a.m. and left as late as 10:30 p.m. All the looms were pre-dressed and tied up. Accompanying each loom was a sample of a finished piece produced on that loom. On some of the looms the treadling for the basic blocks used in the sample were provided. The weaver had to analyse the sample and reproduce it by working out which block came next and how many times to treadle it for the varying heights of the boxes that made up the design. For others even that information was not supplied. The idea was to fish around and find which treadles made which



The Weavers' School fits comfortably into what could be three house basements all put together. The school consists of five rooms: two weaving studios, a classroom with library and shelves of samples, a well equipped kitchen and a bathroom.

blocks without being told, and then to reproduce the sample. Each loom was a learning adventure. There were a variety of complicated twill, doubleweave, overshoot, summer and winter, Bronson lace, huck and two Beiderwands.

Early mornings and late nights were good times to weave because of the relative quiet. During the day, when the air was thunderous with the din of dozens of shafts crashing and smashing down, I could hardly hear myself think. However, there was none of the usual chatter you hear at workshops. This was partly due to the serious approach of the students, but mostly it was due to the need for total concentration.

Weaving II is exciting and compelling. Even if we go home and weave the same things we wove last week, we will understand them better and be less afraid of new ideas, unfamiliar structures or unusual materials. In this way, *Weaving II* changes who we are because it pushes rusty brains down new avenues of thought. It humbles us if we are cocky; it supports us if we are humble. In the end we all came away worn out, but exhilarated and ready to weave with greater confidence and renewed interest.

The Weavers' School:
www.weaversschool.com

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