

NORWEGIAN TEXTILE LETTER

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OLD TAPESTRIES -- NEW INSPIRATION

Speech given on Norwegian radio, August 15, 1967

The last years have seen a growing interest in tapestry weaving in this country. Many are enjoying learning this craft, whether it be for business or hobby. This has led to a steadily increasing stream of visitors to the museums housing old tapestries, the patterns of which many weavers like to copy.

I have had occasion to experience some of these tapestries close at hand, and for 15 years I have been the curator of the gallery "Norsk Billedvev A/S" (Norwegian Tapestry, Inc.), which has its studio in the Museum of Arts and Crafts in Oslo. I will try to describe how we in our studio have arrived at the reconstruction of several of the old tapestries from the Museum of Arts and Crafts.

We exhibited three of these reconstructed tapestries during the month of May this year. We were able to borrow the originals, and it became obvious that these tapestries surprised those who had occasion to see and compare them. The colors, which in the originals had faded with time and become subtle, made an impression with their clear strength and lushness in the reconstructed tapestries. Some colours have disappeared entirely in the originals; others have changed character. It forced us to revise our entire perception of the Norwegian sense of color relating to this aspect of our arts and crafts tradition. I know that some people reacted so strongly to this change that they could not at first feel comfortable with the copied tapestries.

For us in the studio working to restore the tapestries, we have met with many problems and surprises along the road, and the journey has at times seemed long before we were able to see results.

I have been in constant contact with these tapestries for about 23 years, and I have been given challenges which necessitated unlocking some of their secrets.

During World War II I taught tapestry weaving in the State School of Arts and Crafts for Women, which was housed for a few years in the Museum of Arts and Crafts. Thor B. Kielland,

the museum's curator, was then working on his opus Norwegian Tapestry Weaving. He needed a weaver who could help him with some technical samples, and asked me if I could do these. After making a few small samples, I was allowed to weave a full size tapestry. We chose a version of "The Feast of Herod". (OK 1707)



Feast of Herod, the three Magi, and the virgin with child. Gubrandsdal, 17th century. From Aase Bay Sjøvold Norwegian Tapestries. Oslo: C. Huitfeldt, 1976.

This was the first tapestry I was able to experience thread by thread, so to speak. The museum's other tapestries were evacuated during the war, but this one was delivered to me, together with photographs of other versions of the same motif, so I could have something to work from. These days it is probably not easy to understand what a delight it was to be so close to an original tapestry, to be allowed to hold it, touch it, look carefully on the back, and get a slight feeling for how it might have faded, in addition to truly studying the movement of the thread in the weaving, the structure and the types of yarn. This was during the war years when we were starving for everything called quality and beauty; we saw nothing but surrogates wherever we turned. The museums were closed; not an esthetically pleasing thing was to be seen in any stores; all beautiful colors had faded; the world was muddy brown and grey.

I will never forget the experience. And even if we had incredible difficulties procuring everything we needed for this work: the wool, the dyestuffs; linen for warp; yes, even electricity and heat, I know that I immersed myself so thoroughly in this work that it came to mean much for tasks I later tackled. I found a spinner in a bomb shelter during an air raid. Since then, studies about and work with our old tapestries have slowly moved forward. Very slowly sometimes, but still always inspiring us to move forward.

My first surprising conclusion was that many of the light grey areas must originally have been white. This, which now seems obvious, seemed like a shock and was difficult to accept at the time. It necessitated exploring the degree of fading of all the colors. We came to the conclusion that originally they must have been very intense. This was not

an easy concept to grasp, because I did not then understand what type of yarn was used in the original tapestry. I did indeed work with "spelsau" fleece, but I did not at the time realize that the undercoat had to be removed before spinning; the color was not clear enough and the texture not smooth enough until the fine woolen hairs were removed. So, I had a long ways to go.

But still, through the work with this tapestry I understood clearly how the weaver had experienced pleasure creating her work, albeit sometimes woven carelessly or with mistakes, and often continued without correcting the mistakes. But she never forced the threads to follow unnatural directions.

This experience pointed the way for the weaving studio I have managed during the years since.

But more than 20 years passed before we could show the results represented by our exhibit this spring.

When Norsk Billedved A/S (Norwegian Tapestry, Inc.) was established 15 years ago, I secured space for the studio in the Museum of Arts and Crafts. At the same time, that provided me with the opportunity to wander to my heart's content in their "Norwegian gallery" so I had a chance to become increasingly familiar with all the old tapestries they had in their collection.

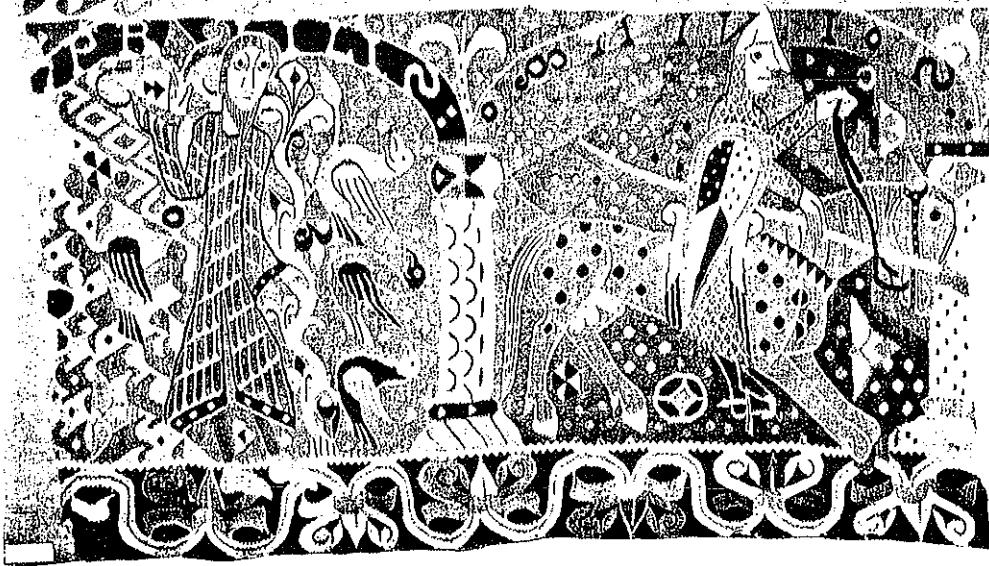
Then followed a challenging commission. We were to produce a copy of the famous "Baldishol" tapestry, the most precious of the museum's treasures. This tapestry is

always requested for exhibits abroad, so Curator Kielland thought it was important to produce a copy for lending to keep the original from being exposed to travel across land and water, suffering the changes of climate as well as other shocks. We got to spend almost a whole year with this tapestry, which is almost 800 years old, everything would be provided us to make tests and samples to get as close to the original as possible.

Meanwhile we had developed a type of yarn we considered authentically acceptable for weft in tapestry, so for the Baldishol tapestry we first needed to study the warp. It appears to be a very thick, tightly twisted yarn spun from the outercoat of the fleece. In most other Norwegian tapestries the warp is made from linen, and besides, this warp is uneven, very uneven. In order to achieve a similar effect I engaged two spinners, both of whom made an attempt to spin unevenly. Then we mixed the two yarns while warping.

There are many signs of primitive equipment used, both for the spinning and for the weaving. Stones have been used to weigh down the warp, and it seems obvious from the tapestry that they might not all have been the same size. The weft is the same type of fiber as the warp, but very thin. Actually, it appears surprisingly thin, thus curving easily around the thicker warp. This results in a significantly raised surface.

There are not many people who have paid much attention to the structure and texture of the tapestry surface. I think I first realized this during the copying of the Baldishol tapestry.



*Fragment of
tapestry with
two pictures of
months. Found
in Baldishol
Church, Nes in
Hedmark. First
half of the 13th
century or
somewhat later.
From Aase Bay
Sjøvold
Norwegian
Tapestries.
Oslo: C.
Huitfeldt, 1976.*

The white areas in the original tapestry are woven with linen.

The technique used in the Baldishol tapestry is the one which lent itself best to the contemporary tapestries the studio has produced since. It is freer, more daring and free flowing than our other tapestries. It became clear that our very oldest tapestry was the one which helped us the most when we worked on commissions during the following years. We concluded, from the perspective of a crafts person, that the Baldishol tapestry is woven by an experienced hand, but with primitive tools in a primitive studio.

Allow me to talk a little more about the construction of a tapestry. I have been helped so much by being able to study the old ones. The individual strands of yarn must be allowed to move freely in the construction, even if the finished tapestry must be tight and hard. Each strand of yarn must stand out clearly and show that this is a textile and not a copy of something else.

This becomes obvious when one studies the old tapestries. But it is entirely different to have occasion to touch and feel the original tapestries and not just be a guest and study the tapestries from the floor. Personally, I feel that when I am in a museum where I am not free to act as if I were in my own home, I have to keep my hands behind my back in order to keep from accidentally touching the textile. My fingers always itch to touch.

But, to clarify: In order to achieve the sharp definition on the surface which the original shows, we need yarn which reflects the color and the shapes without the softer, woolen look. Here the outercoat from the "spelsau" is definitely superior; not that the yarns in the old tapestries always are the same type. By and large, though, the tapestries show a consistent use of long, shiny and strong fibers.

I have never dared approach any of the commissions I have talked about here without making samples, often quite small ones, which I call "stamps" in order to be

Viewing the Textiles at Vesterheim Museum

Textiles on Display - Vesterheim is open daily from 8 to 5. Textiles are displayed in context in the main museum building and in the Open-Air Division. Two Norwegian and five Norwegian-American houses show how textiles would have been used before and after immigration. A permanent textile gallery on the third floor of the main museum is organized by Irene Emery's The Primary Structures of Fabrics. The displays start with textiles created by a single thread (nålbinding and crochet), then two threads (knitting and weaving), and end with woven textiles that have been embellished (Hardangersøm, rosesøm, beadwork). Norwegian and American examples are side by side so you can compare the techniques over time and across cultures.

The temporary exhibition galleries are on the second floor of Vesterheim Center. From October 3, 1997 to April 5, 1998 the galleries will be filled with three exhibits on weaving. More than 50 tools used for "Creating the Tradition" are on display, including sheep shears, flax hackles, spinning wheels, yarn winders, heddle makers, shuttles, looms, and mangles. "Nurtured by Tradition" features contemporary pieces by six weavers who have earned Medals of Honor in Vesterheim's National Exhibition of Weaving. The museum's collection of Norwegian and Norwegian-American handwoven textiles is highlighted in "Preserving the Tradition." Thirty-eight textiles and garments ranging from small to large, old to new, and simple to complex are also reproduced in an exhibition catalog (with 18 color photos) which will be available in October.

Textiles in Storage - Because of the fragile nature of textile artifacts, only a small percentage of the entire collection is on view at any given time. You are invited to see more of the collection via the catalog card file located in the library in Vesterheim Center. Cards, organized by type of object, contain information on the age, history, size, and the techniques used to create and embellish the artifact. A black and white photo is filed with each artifact's card.

If you would like to examine any of the artifacts in storage, please contact me in advance to schedule an appointment. Because of the large number of artifacts and the small staff, we may not be able to accommodate late requests made during the conference. When you set up an appointment, identify what types of textiles you are interested in. Your visit will probably start at the card catalog file. After you have selected which objects you would like to see, a member of the curatorial staff will bring them out for you. For your records, you may sketch or photograph the textiles. Flash photography is permitted. The staff member will explain museum policy concerning the use of photos in publications.

Textiles in the Library - Vesterheim has a good selection of books on Norwegian weaving and textiles. We also have copies of the articles that have been translated with the skills and donations of NBC members. The library is open on weekdays, but during the conference it will also be open

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certain about the relationship between warp and weft. In the originals the weavers did not have a reed which distributed the warp evenly, so we must achieve this unevenness in other ways. And because of this variance, and because they used primitive looms, all the crookedness and inlay of weft became our biggest problem. You can't copy these "mistakes" directly, but you have to consider them as part of the design; otherwise you destroy the pattern and the spirit of the tapestry.

After these "stamps" have clarified a few questions for us, we weave some sections of the tapestry, large enough to determine the colour match.

Sometimes we have to make as many as four samples. The difference between the faded colours in the old tapestries and those we now have arrived at is probably what appears as the most obvious difference to the viewer when the new tapestry is finished, and it is probably also the most important difference.

Much can be said about how to arrive at the original colour: I will only say a little here. One can conclude a lot by looking into the twist of the yarn on the wrong side of the tapestry, or in a place which has been folded, or at a thicker spot in the spinning. We are truly grateful to find such things which quite often offer a solution to a problem. But you can't solve the puzzle just by looking into one thread.

The degree of fading is not the same for all colours, so it is not possible to find a

this field. And we still have more unanswered questions. We know and see

that the yellow colours always have faded the most, and therefore also the green colours which contain yellow. However, other colours have also changed character drastically enough to create headaches.

And then the colours must harmonize: one must intuitively feel they are right together. For me it has been of the utmost importance that I have been able to wander freely in the "Norwegian gallery" and continually discover new things in the old tapestries, and then quite often I have been inspired to duplicate a small section of a tapestry.

And we have done just that in the studio when we have had the time. As a rule such a small detail has led to an attempt at something larger, and finally we have attempted the whole tapestry. The work with a new piece always leads us to new discoveries, so that this experience can be used in the next one. But I don't believe it is ever possible to pin everything down. There will always be new angles to consider. Two weavers never weave exactly the same; they might not see the shapes similarly either, and the spinning, well the spinning means so much.

I am not sure people recognize how important the raw material is. We still have some people who are able to spin the fine, shiny, strong and flexible yarn necessary for these constructions, which we have learned to appreciate to such a degree in tapestries. In parenthesis I must remark that a poorly spun yarn from the outercoat of a fleece is as ugly as anyone can imagine.

It took a while to find people who could learn to spin the correct way. We advertised

in several newspapers, and a few people responded but most gave up, either during training or later. The spinner needs to develop an attitude about a degree of artistic achievement necessary, and no one can say this is work which pays well, but we found a few people who still could spin regular knitting yarn. A couple of them have been faithful spinners for our studio and are still with us, and we recruit a few new ones every once in a while, but unfortunately we have to face the prospect that it is becoming more and more difficult to procure this yarn.

Well trained spinners have each and every one passed on their unique talents to the work, and this is something we must take advantage of while weaving; the yarn provides excitement and life to the surface but can also create problems if we do not know how to make it work for us. Two skeins, for example, can look quite different in the dyebath if they come from different spinners. We encounter these surprises often.

A little more about colours. Particularly the yellow. In the old tapestries, yellow is often quite reduced or changed; it always fades more than red or blue. Through the years we have frequently experimented with trying to find the most reliable dyestuff for yellow. The degree and character of fading among the yellow colours also differs from one old tapestry to another, so it is likely that the dyers have used different plants. However, they have probably not experienced the fading of colours themselves, either, since I would assume the tapestries have never been hanging on walls for daily display but have probably been well protected in dark and cool rooms. In our times they are exposed to many more dangers and must tolerate electrical light as well as sunlight pouring

through large windows, dry heat the year round as well as dust and air pollution, even if they hang in museums.

But it comes as a surprise to most people that the Baldishol tapestry has kept its colours better than many far younger tapestries. It would be very interesting to discover what kinds of plants were used as dyes.

I wonder how contemporary chemical colours will tolerate the same stress. But anyway, after many, many tests we have now found plants which contain so strong a yellow dyestuff that it is more resistant to fading. And this means that we also can achieve more pure green hues, which also are more colour fast, as well as luminous orange hues. This presents new possibilities for the tapestries we are currently creating.

It is natural as well as sensible and right that we are constantly seeking new possibilities and new avenues to follow in this handcraft, both in materials and in techniques, but I do believe that the old tapestries still have a lot to teach us. A thorough understanding of the raw materials is important, as well as a sense of quality. Without these criteria the craft can easily become lost, and it might be difficult to revive when or if it is needed. Tapestries have been regarded through the centuries as a form of decorative art, but they must be constructed according to the principles of good craftsmanship, otherwise their value might be short lived.

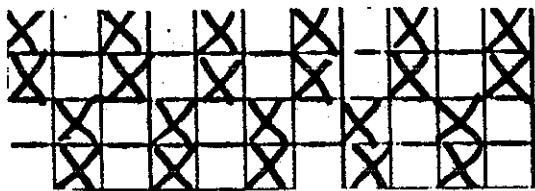
It is possible that our old Norwegian tapestries are more important from a craftsman's standpoint than from an artistic point of view, but with their beautiful

materials, their pure colours and their consistently high textile standards, they are holding their own in our cultural history. I also believe that quite a few of our creative fine artists have found inspiration while walking in the museum's "Norwegian gallery".

"Gamle Teppe - Ny Inspirasjon" by Elsa Halling first appeared in ARBOK 1972-1975, Kunstindustrimuseet, Oslo. Translated from the Norwegian by NBC member Eva Hovde Douthit

FOR THE LOOM

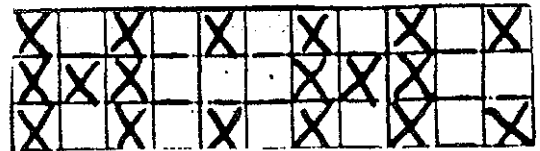
MORE ON RUTEÅKLE (square weave coverlet): The ornamentation on the upper and lower borders of an åkle varies and is typically west coast. The borders also vary in width and design. The most prevalent, and sometimes the only design, is the *kjerringtenner* (old lady's teeth) woven in two colors. Colors are placed in alternate sheds for two or three shots of each color to build a vertical stripe or toothed effect.



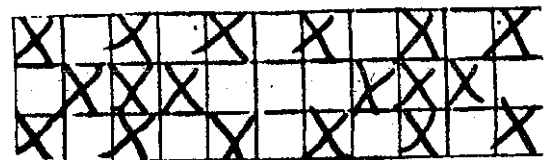
Another technique used for the borders is *Stripes* which are generally narrow and symmetrical and include the basic colors in the åkle itself. Stripes often separate some of the other motifs from each other.

H's (Hårrender) is done in an overshot technique with a tabby shot between each laid-in shot combined with *kjerringtenner*. Two contrasting colors are used. Weave three shots of a light color alternating with a dark color and ending with the light

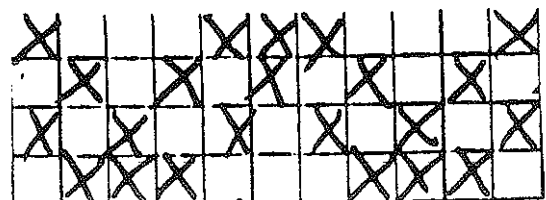
color. The central bars of the H are an overshot pickup with the dark color floating over three warp ends and under three and joining the two legs of the H. It may be necessary to go over two or three threads at the selvedge edge to place the floats correctly, depending on the number of warp ends on the loom. Weave the other legs of the H in the same way.



Crabs (Kråbberender) is done in the same overshot technique as the H's with the same center floats over three warps and under three warps with tabby shots in between. But the floats are placed so they cross a central dark weft and a light one on each side which gives a six-legged effect. A series of small crosses "liten kors" are also evident.

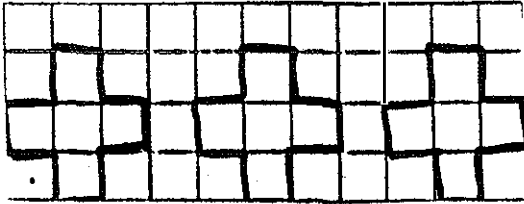


Water and Mountains (Fjord and Fjell): A workshop in Decorah, Iowa in 1978 gave the name to this pattern. The technique is the same as the two above but is woven with three colors - usually red, white and blue. The alternating floats at top and bottom are red; the central *kjerringtenner* is alternating blue and white. Note that the top and bottom floats alternate with each other.

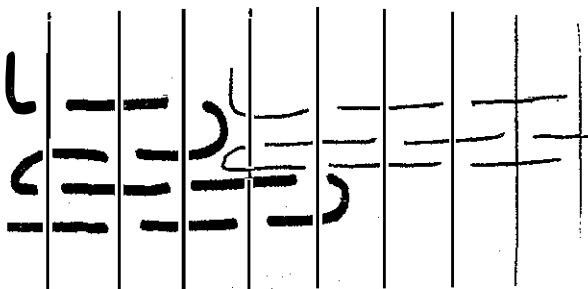


CLASSIFIEDS

Korsbord (row of crosses): This design is woven in the single interlock technique described earlier in the March 1997 Textile Newsletter. The crosses can be placed in various places and are of one color or include the colors used in the åkle.



Lynild (Lightning or zigzag): An even number of threads must be used for each section. The progression of this design is achieved by letting 1 or 2 weft threads overlap in the same shed when the wefts are moving in the direction of the pattern. Begin on the left with the first warp in the UP position and with butterflies to the right. In the next shot, each butterfly is brought around the UP warp just behind it and it overlaps one weft in the adjoining color to the left. The butterfly is always brought around the UP warp behind it, but it overlaps the adjoining color only when it is moving in the direction the lightning pattern is moving. New colors will have to be added at each selvedge to keep the sections even in width.



Syvilla Tweed Bolson

LICHEN DYES: A SOURCE BOOK by Karen Diadick Casselman. Comprehensive 20,000 work monograph on historical and modern lichen pigments; many charts, international bibliography. \$12 US or Cnd (pre-paid includes postage). Studio Vista, 2018 New Chevie, Nova Scotia, Canada, B0N 1G0.

TWEEDS and FLEECE features Norwegian yarns including Raumagarn Spælsau in several weights, Roros-Tweed Billedvevgarn, Strikkegarn and knitting patterns. For more information contact Syvilla Tweed Bolson, 512 Locust Rd., Decorah IA 52101-1002, 319-382-3711. e-mail smtweed@salamander.com.

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1999 TEXTILE WORKSHOP/MUSEUM TOUR UPDATE

Thank you to all the Breakfast Club members who sent in survey responses, and also for the many added notes I received. And now for the results:

1. A variety of locations were suggested by respondents, but Trondheim was the most frequently mentioned (6), closely followed by "any location with good opportunities."
2. In responding to the question of Lofoten as a workshop location, the majority were in favor, although most qualified that response with concerns about cost.
3. Of the classes suggested for a northern location, rye received the most interest (7), with the warp-weighted loom right behind (6). Several indicated Sami band weaving (3) and there was a smattering of interest in other subjects.
4. Although most felt traditional textiles were of primary importance, many expressed an interest in visiting contemporary collections as well.
5. And finally, in the highly scientific polling of attitudes, 14 respondents were either highly (9) or very (5) excited, several were cautiously excited (3), with only 1 zzzzz.

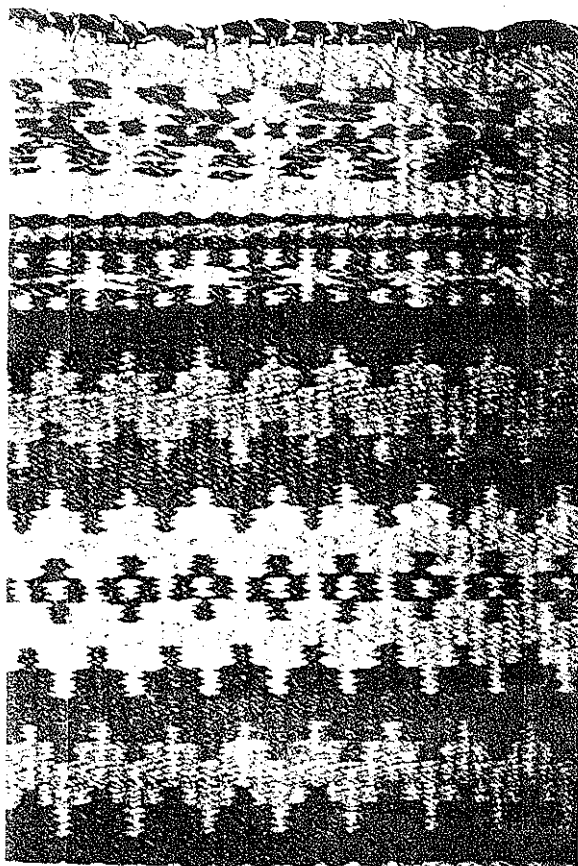
Based on the interest in northern Norway indicated by the survey responses, I wrote to a Husflid consultant in that area and have just received a response. So far, there seem to be two good possibilities for workshop locations, one not far from Bodø and the other in Lofoten, both at folk high schools. I will be investigating those two in the coming weeks. Course material will depend to some extent on the availability of teachers, but I will use the survey results as a starting point. Since many also indicated an interest in Trondheim, I will begin to look into opportunities in that area for touring museum collections, studios and other textile exhibits.

Thanks again to all of you who took the time to respond. It made my trip to the mailbox every day most enjoyable. Please contact me again if you have any questions, suggestions or concerns!

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Mystery Coverlet

Laurann Gilbertson and Syvilla Tweed Bolson
Decorah, Iowa



A “New” Åklæ Vesterheim Museum recently received a fine Norwegian coverlet that was made with a combination of weaving techniques. This coverlet appears to have been woven on a vertical loom, possibly warp-weighted, because it was woven in a single width and has a heading cord. The donor, Erling Dalaker of Rochester, New York, didn’t know much about the coverlet other than it had come from Stavanger, Norway. Erling’s great-grandfather immigrated to Stavanger Township in rural Ossian (near Decorah, Iowa) in 1873.

The coverlet is 65” by 51” (165 x 129.5 cm). The warp is two-ply linen (z-spun, s-ply) doubled (6 epi), and the weft is handspun, two-ply wool (s-spun, z-ply, 18-28 ppi). There are just four colors of weft: gray, gold, red, and

blue. The coverlet was woven in *krokbragd* (boundweave) and several plain weave and inlay techniques including *krabberender* (crabs), *kjerringtenner* (“old lady’s teeth” or vertical stripes), and *Vestfold*. Each technique has its own band. There are twelve bands and six different patterns.

Pattern	Band number
	heading cord
X	1
B	2
V	3
C	4
T	5
C	6
V	7
C	8
T	9
C	10
V	11
S	12

- X - Xs
- B - Boundweave / *krokbragd*
- V - *Vestfold* technique
- C - Crabs / *krabberender*
- T - Old Lady’s Teeth / *kjerringtenner*
- S - Stripes

Weave Along! You are invited to weave an adaptation of this coverlet. Think of it as a “mystery coverlet” project. Beginning with this newsletter and continuing for three to five newsletters, we will print instructions for pattern bands. You won’t know what the whole coverlet looks like until the last installment. If you do weave along with the project, please let us know. We’d like to print a photo of your weaving along with a photo of the original textile.