THE PAINTER AND THE FIGURED FABRIC

by

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I should like very gratefully to acknowledge the help given me

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Hopley
pen drawing with color wash

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The painter proceeds from things he knows; from things, places, and times which through association hold for him a special attachment, growing in significance as he realizes that it stems from a time in his life when he was keenly attuned to physical and emotional forces around him. This attachment creates for him a point of departure from which he can build a structure for expression.

Thus, I present as the source of inspiration for this paper, and for all of my thesis work:

THE BRANDYWINE

A Thing, a Place, and a Time all in one

THE RIVER AND THE MILL

In an area shared by the two states, Pennsylvania and Delaware, there begins and ends a very small, a very powerful, and a very old river. Sometimes called a millstream, sometimes a creek, this river in the prime of its productive life turned close to two hundred mill wheels, although at its widest point it is no more than fifty yards. It rises out of the Welsh mountains and, flowing in multiplicity until it reaches a natural confluence, it matures to pour its waters over a rocky bed through farmlands into Delaware; twenty-five miles in all and with a drop greater than that of Niagara Falls.

The name of this river, the Brandywine, stirs the imagination with its sound. Its age makes it old even before the Lenni-Lenape Indians lived close by its bank.

The fast flowing Brandywine became involved in the development of the country from its earliest moments when the Swedes powered the first horizontal water wheel from its waters. Quickly the small river became a source of power for many mills: grist mills, sawmills, fulling mills, paper mills, powder mills; and forges, furnaces, and cotton gins.

Its leading industry became the manufacture of black powder, with the powder mill stretching along the southern bank of the Brandywine for two miles or more. Its buildings were heavily constructed of stone and neatly paced, two by two, with water wheels between. A self-sufficient

community it was in its early days, bound closely together by a common way of life and a common danger of explosion from the mill.

The yards and buildings of the black powder mill, unproductive and quiet for more than a generation, have lately been put in good order and opened as a museum of early Brandywine industry. Its transformation, however, has not disturbed, but rather, has enhanced the spirit of the place.

ITS LOOK

The color of the Brandywine is green to me: a soft, clear, liquid, wood and stone and growing green which is an inherent quality of the river in its every aspect. Even in the gray light of a dead winter day when the ice is a covering, solid and smooth, for the water, there is a hint of the green; and after a hard summer rain when the mud is in the water, thick and brown, it is an anticipation of the green. The color comes perhaps from the course the Brandywine has taken: down from the low-lying mountains, over shallow pools of water vegetation, through deep green woods over rocky beds, through pale green and gray pastures, through populated and industrial places, old places and new places. Perhaps the color comes from the time of the river's existence: from the early, clean time when the water slowly cut its way in shallow streamlets down the hills into its bed; from the working time when the water was developed and channeled into a strong and decisive tool, easy with tasks that hands could not accomplish; and from the quieting-down time since, when the water has been allowed again to flow its natural way at its natural pace over its course.

I think of the Brandywine and the powder mill together; they are so much a part of each other that I cannot think of them separately. The stream of itself is independent, deriving its vitality from its own sources. But this mill, like all the mills on its banks, depended upon the stream as its source of power. When the powder industry turned to other power sources it also turned, eventually, to other sites for growth. Now the stream and the mill have become, in their comparative idleness, each a part of the other and, together, a permanent structural unit.

The green of the Brandywine seems to settle over everything alike: the water, the trees, the mill roads, the woods rising away from the river, the stone walls and wood fences; over the white painted trim of the yard buildings, and the black of the wrought iron gates at the mill entrances; the green seems to be over everything alike, except the clear blue sky above the trees.

I notice the aura of the green particularly around the mill structures, the old rolling mills, the glazing mill, the graining mill. These structures are facing close against the water with the quiet mill race behind; they are as much a part of the stream as the rocks in its bed which are washed green by the water.

The stone of the structures is gray, a stone which was taken by the mill workers from the ridges nearby, carved into blocks (some to a breadth and depth of three and four feet) and fitted, one over another each in its own place--so fitted that the mortar in the crevices seems only an unneeded refinement. The building up of the stone became a three-sided wall of such thickness and weight that only the most devastating explosion could dislodge it. The fourth wall of the structure,

flimsey and light, faced the stream which received its fragments in repeated explosions in the early milling years. The stone walls have settled now into a solidity which seems to have grown from the earth and stream. Here and there, set by rust-red hinges into the stone, a door still hangs. Its slats are curved at the top to fit within the opening under the gently radiating pink brick lintel. Its patina is that of faintly gleaming pewter, streaked with a black tarnish, its side framing splintered with age and hanging against the wall by an iron peg or two.

Within one rolling mill, flooded with light from its open side, there is a giant black cast iron grinding wheel, ten tons in weight and six feet in diameter, so black against the stone that the black seems almost infinite. Within this one structure tremendous forces of tension must be still at work, and I have pondered many times over the enormous forces of explosive tension which must have been set into action by the water from the mill race as it poured onto the breast of the wheel at the side of the building.

I have looked and looked at the stone faces of the buildings, the willow gray of the stone, the surface interruptions of raw white mortar and seeping streaks of red. I have looked closely and found tiny leaf-vines growing in the shadowy crevices and microscopic moss staining the stone. I have looked beyond the surface, my eyes losing their focus in concentration, and I have found a new surface of form and image. Walking away, I have looked, and found that the green had settled down again.

Image in Black - oil

Outlook - oil

MY RESPONSE

Natural structural forms have always had a strong appeal for me and have found a natural place in my painting.

As a child I was taught a love for natural things: for the woods which were always close around us; for the streams of clear water which could always be found in the woods; for the small growing things which could always be found underfoot, moss and mushrooms and the beginnings of trees. I was taken often to the woods to look and to wander.

As I grew in perception I began to notice the form of things: the perfect, natural fitting together of the intrinsic parts of wood, the infinite intensities of color blending together to form the natural tones of rock, the ever-changing water with its filtering in and out of color; and in all these forms the perfectly reasonable textures of natural surface.

The Brandywine and its close lying buildings seem to me a complete embodiment of natural structure: the fitting together of forms in the close relationship of the river and the buildings, and the fitting together of parts of a form in the blocks of the buildings, one against the other.

The river and the powder mill impress me particularly as an expression of various qualities of time: the time of the existence of natural forms and their relation to historical time and human existence; the effect of time upon an enduring natural form (In the complete validity of the essence of structure natural forms assume a proper relationship

Brandywine - '01

Powder mill - oil

TIME AND THE PAINTER

As the Brandywine is a microcosm of time in an historical sense, a natural constant of the various concepts of time which have affected the industrial and human activity related to the river, so, in a larger sense, might the painter be considered the microcosm. The painter has been the constant in his relationships with historical concepts of time, which in each case he has interpreted and which in turn have led him to the modern concept: that of the importance and value of the very moment in which he is working, the complex moment, deriving simultaneously from many sources and extending on in many directions.

> The discovery that, on the one hand, the same man experiences so many and different irreconcilable things in one and the same moment, and that, on the other hand, the same things are happening at the same time in so many places; of which modern means of communication make us conscious, is perhaps the real source of the new conception of time and the abruptness with which modern art describes temporary phenomena.[1]

The modern concept of time has released the painter from all historical bonds and has as its counterpart a freedom of expression which for the painter was never before possible: freedom of concept, of stimulation, of application.

> For the artist, the past used to be a stream; now it is an ocean. It used to be a road; now it is a forest. Tradition in art used to mean a steady sequence of change within boundaries. Today the boundaries are vague, if they exist at all. Horizons are infinite; the artist is tempted to explore in a hundred

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[1]Arnold Houser, "The Conception of Time in Modern Art and Science," The Partisan Review, vol. XXIII, No. 3, Summer, 1956, p. 330.

directions at once.[2]

In this very freedom, in his awareness of the seemingly limitless vastness of the painting area the painter is bound by an unchangeable precept, one which perhaps figures more importantly in the present outlook concerning painting aspects than in the limited historical attitude. It is the "kind of loyalty to truth which is required of the artist, and which is loyalty to his own singular vision."[3]

If, in acknowledging his freedom, and through this "loyalty to truth," the painter is led to explore within his painting area his sensitivity to his creative intuition, might he not be led to intensify this exploration within a painterly[4] medium which within its own characteristic framework would present to him a different set of conditions or which would rearrange for him within a new physical boundary conditions he knows well?

It is with this attitude that the painter might well investigate the figured fabric.

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[2]John Canaday, Mainstreams of Modern Art (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), p. 3.

[3]Jacques Maritain, Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry (New York: Meridian Books, Inc., 1958), p. 52.

[4]"While the strongly stressed outline fixes the presentment, (painterly), it lies in the essence of a paintery representation to give it an indeterminate character; form begins to play; lights and shadows become an independent element, they seek and hold each other from height to height, from depth to depth; the whole takes on the semblance of a movement ceaselessly emanating, never ending. Whether the movement be leaping and vehement, or only a gentle flicker, it remains for the spectator inexhaustible."

Heinrich Wolfflin (Translated by M. D. Hottinger), Principals of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art (Printed U. S. A.: Dover Publications, Inc., 1929).

THE PAINTER'S ATTITUDE TOWARD THE FIGURED FABRIC

> The term, "figured fabric," is often used to denote any fabric ornamented with design by weaving, embroidery, painting, printing, or in some other way.[5]

My approach to the figured fabric, for the purpose of this study, was that of a painter toward an art medium, which holds its own place in the realm of art and yet which would seem in its nature to be closely akin to painting.

As an artist[6] investigating an art medium as a means of heightening his sensitivity to his own creative image, and, in particular, as a painter[7] using the figured fabric as the medium of that investigation, I considered it necessary to divorce myself completely from the traditional influences which have attached themselves to the figured fabric: those of pattern, purpose, and character.

Moreover, since the creative area was to be an interchangeable one between the two art forms, the ultimate aim of such a working interchange seemed to be the aesthetic satisfaction in the final products, brought about by a technical competence in the various processes not as an end in itself, but as a means of stimulating the response of the artist to his work.

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[5] J. F. Flanagan, as cited in Charles Joseph Singer: A History of Technology, vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954-58), p. 187.

[6] I use the term "artist" in his relation to all fine art mediums; the term "painter" in his relation to painting.

[7] Ibid.

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF PAINTING AND THE FIGURED FABRIC

In the case of painting the painter is working essentially with three raw materials: a protectively prepared surface, color in a plastic vehicle, and tools for application of the color. The surface itself generally submits almost completely to its covering of color and medium in the final product. The painter may apply his color in its particular plastic vehicle to the working surface, either leaving it so or further manipulating it in a blending or covering manner; then he must allow the painting vehicle to dry and become adhered to the surface. In applying the color the painter is free to use any one or a combination of methods and tools, the most universal of which is the stroking on of the color with a brush. Texture (that is, texture on the physical painting surface) is significant to the painter in its complete absence or in its presence as a build-up of the painting medium in impasto.[8]

In the fabric medium also the artist used the three essential raw materials of the painter, but to him the factor of texture becomes an ingredient equally important; and as a final affecting dimension he should consider the fabric's own basic characteristic, drapability.

In the fabric processes discussed presently pigment is available to the artist in either of two forms: as a dye locked permanently within a strand of thread or yarn; or a dye in a water vehicle which should be made permanent by the application of heat to the fabric. As strands of thread or yarn, a complete palette of dry and stable color is present at the out-

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[8] Ralph Mayer, The Artist's Handbook of Materials and Techniques (New York: The Viking Press, 1957), pp. 129-230.

set, to be mixed as the artist desires. But, while in painting two colors when completely mixed together permanently change their color personalities to take on that of the new color, in the fabric mediums, where strands of color are used, two colors when in close relationship, give the effect of a new color which may be destroyed immediately by separating the strands.

The methods of applying color to the working surface of the fabric medium vary with each technique. It is significant, however, that one of the least important of the methods is the application of color by brush (in one of the three processes described in this study the brush is used). In applying color in the fabric medium, the artist may work it in as he produces the fabric, or he may attach the color by laying it on and in areas allowing it to penetrate the surface. It is characteristic of the figured fabric that the color, in its vehicle becomes a structural part of the surface. The surface and the color work together, and each remains as independent factor through to the finished product.

Texture is created either as the color is applied or as a separate facet of the fabric process, or both, according to the process itself.

In my thesis study, I have worked with three of the figured fabric processes; and I present, following, analyses of these processes as the painter might view them.

FREE WEAVING

As different from traditional patterned weaving as, for instance, a freely formed mosaic is different from a beautifully patterned brick wall, free weaving relies first and last upon the intuitive impulse of the artist. With this medium as with other art mediums the artist feels first the desire to create an image; then, considering the framework of his

medium, he sets about producing a work which has a twofold reason for being: that of making tangible his mind's image; and of exploring the utmost possibilities of the physical area in which he is working.

The loom then becomes his area of productivity and, using its physical structure (the strong relationship between vertical and horizontal) the artist seeks to build into his structure other dimensions.

In this process it is of special importance that the artist retain the strength of his original conception by planning, through advance sketches, the form and placement of the image he wishes to express and by keeping evidence of his planning nearby while he works.

The process of weaving excites in the artist who understands and loves his instrument a strong feeling of empathy for the work which grows slowly and steadily through the combined efforts of his eyes, his hands, and the loom: a kind of spiritual bond which comes uninvited and remains as the fabric is developed. The unique manner of growth of the woven fabric, from beginning to end of warp (the lengthwise threads of a fabric) demands of the artist complete and consistent concentration upon the area in which he is working, whatever its relative importance in the ultimate product. As he works, shed by shed, he must exert a constant force of expression since as he weaves his work, rolling onto the beam, is continually lost to his eye. It is only when he reaches the end of his warp and cuts his work from the loom that he can react to the physical expression of his conceived image.

EMBROIDERY

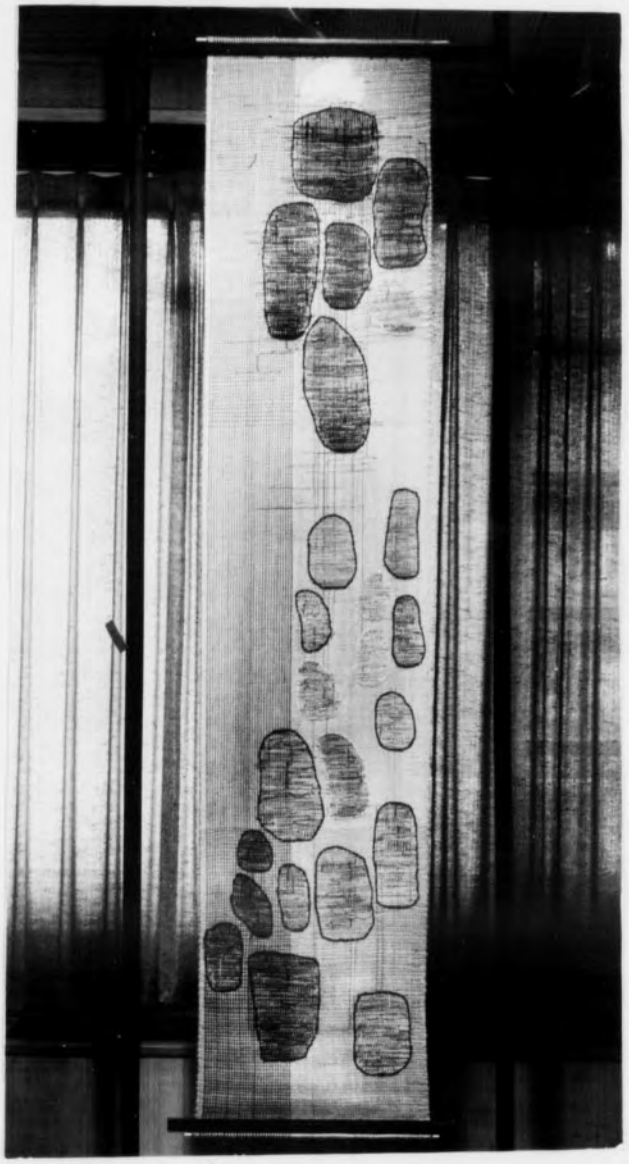
In producing an embroidery the artist attaches color and texture through groupings of stitches to the surface of the fabric. These stitches

may be varied to the limit of the artist's imagination once he has learned the basic technique. As with free weaving, it is important for the artist to approach embroidery with an attitude of discovering within its technical framework a means of strengthening his intuitive power of expression.

Embroidery offers the painter a unique challenge in that its final result is closely akin to that of painting, whereas its methods of achieving that result differ radically; for this reason the medium demands of the painter an attitude of complete submission to its process.

The fabric surface; yarns and threads of varying thickness, color and quality; and the needle are the ingredients with which the artist is able to apply his area of design. Each of the first two ingredients is equally important in the final result; and each is important in its relation to two other factors of embroidery: texture and movement or direction. The stitch either in single form or in a series is the basis for the design. It inevitably creates a texture through its contours, and it may or may not employ color different from that of the surface. It almost invariably creates a movement which may be stable within its structure (the cross stitch, the French knot), or which may be directional (the feather stitch, the chain stitch). In a series of stitches the directional feeling is quite strong.

Once he is imbued with the personality of the process the artist is free to use all the factors of the medium to produce a design in obedience to his concept. The strictest limitation with which he must cope, one which seems to be unique in this process, is that of his own hand. The artist finds that whatever the strength of his concept, or however urgently the spirit of his creative intuition presses him on, he



Free weaving

Embroidery

must harness the urge to his own working pace and keep his original concept constant, for he can only develop it a thread and a stitch at a time.

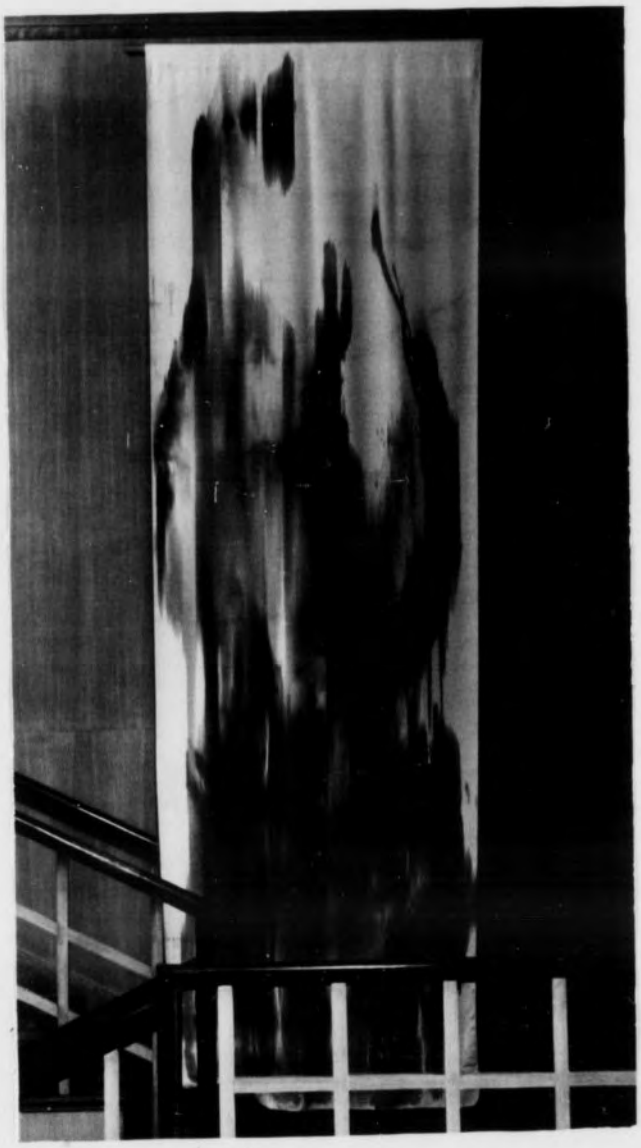
WARP PAINTING

For the painter this fabric medium might seem to be, as the term implies, a form of expression within an area with which he is quite familiar, viz. painting. Moreover, it would seem to have the same connection for the weaver, since the process uses as its design surface the warp threads of a fabric. In both areas the assumption would be partly correct. For the purpose of a candid analysis, however, the warp painting process should be considered as independent of either area.

Warp painting is indeed a painting process, in which the pigment in a liquid dye vehicle is applied by brush or other means to an expanse of taut warp on a flat surface. In this respect the process is much like watercolor painting; in fact, the sensitive blending of the liquid color would seem to be one of the aspects of this process most pleasing to the painter.

Warp painting is also a weaving process, but is designed for a power loom (on which this study was carried out). The design seems to be most effective when applied to a fine warp (that is, a warp which is sleyed at approximately 44 threads to the inch).

It is when the liquid color is in contact with the warp threads that the medium takes on its own attributes. The fibers of the warp, which must have an affinity for the dye vehicle, absorb the liquid causing it to spread, not as watercolor would spread over the surface area of paper;



Warp painting

Warp painting with embroidery

NOTES ON MY WORK

I. Painting (listed in order of completion, with working time indicated after each painting):

1. Image in Black - 2 hours
2. Outlook - 8 hours
3. Brandywine - 12 hours
4. Powder Mill - 2 hours
5. Image - 1½ hours

As a support for my painting I used linen of medium roughness, being careful to cut the fabric true to its weave and to stretch it with the weave as nearly parallel to the stretcher-frame as possible; this, together with tacking evenly from center points on the stretcher-frame, assures an even tautness of the primed surface with a minimum of warping.[9] As a ground I applied a rabbit-skin glue size and white lead priming according to Utrecht's directions.[10]

I used oil colors direct from the tubes, thinning with gum turpentine as needed. At times I used the "all purpose painting medium" (Stand Oil, 1 part; Damar Varnish, 1 part; Gum turpentine, 5 parts; Cobalt Drier, a few drops), as recommended by Utrecht Linens.

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[9] Utrecht Linens, Catalog (New York: Utrecht Linens, Manufacturers and Distributors, 1959), no page.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

II. Figured Fabrics (listed in order of beginning):

1. Woven Hanging - to be viewed from both sides, 20" x 84". Worked on a four-harness floor loom.

Warp: demi-linen fibers of two colors with overlay of colored threads in wool and synthetic[12] fibers. Sleyed 8 threads per inch.

Weft (or filling): Open background areas of wool. Closely woven areas (in forms) of wool and synthetic fibers.

A background of open weaving with areas of concentrated weaving creating forms, progressing in closely related tones in varied colors, and outlined in black or white.

Working time: 90 hours.

2. Embroidery - wall hanging, 28" x 66".

Worked on a Swedish type[13] wood frame. Colored threads of wool and synthetic fibers applied to unbleached Belgian craft linen.

Working time: 60 hours.

3. Warp Painting - wall hanging, 56" x 144". Worked on power loom; liquid dye[14] applied by brush.

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[12]These fibers include nylon, DACRON*, ORLON*; E. I. DuPont de Nemours and Company, Wilmington, Delaware. (*Registered Trade Mark.)

[13]Eivor Fisher, Swedish Embroidery (London: B. T. Batsford, Ltd., 1953), p. 8.

[14]As supplied by Burlington Industries, Greensboro, N. C.: Cuprofix Yellow GL, Blue 18 GLL, Solagua Scarlet TLF, Ciba Brown LLRT, National Black GAC, Dipheryl Brilliant Blue 5B, Bellamine Orange 4G, Atlantic Red 3BLX.

Warp of 20's/2 ply spun viscose rayon; sleyed 44 threads per inch.

Weft (or horizontal filling) of 12's/2 ply spun viscose rayon; 36 picks per inch.

Weaving pattern: Five-harness broken sateen warp face.

Working time: 2 hours.

4. Warp Painting with Embroidery - wall hanging, 56" x 144".

(Weaving data same as for piece Number 3.) Liquid dye applied by dripping and spreading by hand.

Embroidery: wool yarn over areas

Working time: 6 hours.

5. Weaving with Embroidery - wall hanging, 20" x 30" (approximately).

Worked on a four-harness floor loom.

Warp: 30/3 (indicates size) cotton thread, sleyed 30 threads per inch. Unbleached background with overlay of colored threads.

Weft: Cotton thread (same as warp) with colored threads woven and embroidered in design.

Working time: (estimated) 12 hours.

My work in painting and the figured fabrics was done over a period of several months. It was produced as time in each day allowed, rather than in the framework of a rigid schedule.

Work on paintings and fabrics progressed interchangeably within each of the mediums and between the two mediums; in this way exploration in all directions within my working range was possible.

CONCLUSION

I have used the Brandywine as the source of inspiration for my thesis work because I believe that the artist must proceed in his work from something: a place, a time, an experience, which he knows with such completeness that he can turn back to it at any moment of his creative experience and find in it an expression of validity for his thinking and an influence which will impel his expression in any direction. Such an inspiration must have for the artist the power of holding him to its own constancy while encouraging him to the freedom he needs for productive growth and maturity.

This constant and complete source of inspiration is particularly important for the artist who, as in my study, is turning his concentration of expression in more than one direction; for it can free him to explore each medium in all its dimensions of possibility.

In addition, if he is to gain creatively from his work in several areas of expression, the artist must become, during the time of his work, completely a part of that medium and in sympathy with its unique characteristics. The universal desire for change, which must be innate with the artist as with anyone, should incite in him a new enthusiasm as he approaches a facet of his whole productive expression. As he interchangeably works, in this attitude of adjustment, it would seem that the artist gives a little and takes a little for the wholeness of his experience.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of any working interchange among creative mediums is that of time: the area of time involved, let

us say, in a painting which takes under two hours to complete (as did the fifth painting in my study) and in a piece of weaving which requires ninety hours for completion. How does the artist compensate in his intuitive process of expression for this great divergence in time? What happens to the "flash" of intuition, the momentary awareness of the creative impulse? The answers to these questions might lie in what I consider the "creative moment" to be, the precise period of time in which the artist expresses his creative concept. Thus, to the painter, as he is painting, the "creative moment" might be an instant in which he conceives the wholeness of his image; but to the weaver the "creative moment" almost invariably becomes the complete area of time in which the fabric is produced; for the weaver in his consistency of production must again and again renew the strength of his conception; indeed, he must keep his creative impulse in a constant state of quiet excitement.

> Time in modern art--is an indifferent medium; it has no direction, no inevitability, no significance in itself--it receives its meaning from us. Its relativity seems to convey one message: Life is, like time itself, what you make of it.[15]

Thus, the painter like the Brandywine which matures in powers from the confluence of its two feeding streams, would seem to gather from all his creative mediums an intensity of response to his intuitive impulse and strength of expression for his image

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[15]Houser, op. cit., p. 333.

"Image" - oil

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