Weaving Phenomenological Narratives:

A formal analysis of artefact design and appearance

This neatly constructed little loom brought me to another place, the first time I lay eyes on it. My mind floated out of the room and across the world to the streets of Vientiane, Laos, where it is not uncommon to hear the rhythmic sliding and beating of silk fibers as they are woven on a large floor loom. Despite my nostalgic memories and associations, this loom is of quite a different origin, construction, and intended use. Yet the sensory experience of witnessing another person weave on a horizontal loom or being the one that is weaving are still connected phenomenologically, with the sight of its general linear organization and overall visual appearance.

The loom in the Material Culture Collection at UCL is marked with a card tag indicating the accession number of U.0012. Its original classification number was SS12, indicating it was considered a model. The code SS12 is also written on the top of the left side beam that runs parallel to the warp threads toward the front of the loom. Also, on the broad exterior side of
both of these beams there is a stamp impression that reads “DRYAD LTD” on top, and just
below that “LEICESTER” in a slightly smaller font. This allowed me to deduce the fact that
the loom is of British origin.

The loom stands 17.25 inches tall and is considered a 9 inch loom due to the fact that the
width of the loom allows for a 9 inch wide weaving space. It is constructed of a light reddish
colored wood and connected at its joints by brass and steel screws, with reinforced with steel
brackets at the two canopy joints (Dryad 1951: 3-4). The metal hardware has been darkened
with age, but there is no visible rust on any of these pieces. At several of the joining points in
the wood pieces of the loom there are matching numbers stamped into either side of the joint.
This, along with the availability of a user manual, from the manufacturer, indicates that this
was a loom kit that consumers were expected to self-assemble. There are four heddle frames
on this loom. Each of three heddle frames hang from the canopy by a length of a waxed
hemp-like twine that feeds up through a hole in the canopy and are anchored to the base of
the loom by a metal spring on each of the bottom corners of the frame. The threads connect
to pear shaped wooden pulls above the canopy that allow the weaver to adjust the heddles.
The string that the fourth and front heddle used to hang from has snapped and the heddle
frame now rests on the table in a similar position to the reed, which is also commonly called a beater (ibid).

The loom is currently threaded and there are approximately 24 inches of cotton textile already woven. It stretches horizontally from the heddles to the front beam and is wound compactly onto the front roller. The warp threads appear to be a fine unbleached cotton yarn. The weft threads are composed of a combination of alternating rows of light blue, green, and pink fine mercerized cotton yarn, along with rows of the same unbleached yarn used for the warp threads. It can be deduced that, the thread is cotton, both from the length and texture of the fibers and the visible signs of color fading from the ends of some of the yarns, as synthetic fibers tend to be longer and more colorfast (see green and pink yarn ends in figure 7).
When analyzing the weave of this textile piece it is apparent that the weft tension is inconsistent from section to section. In the portion of the textile just above the front roller in which green weft threads have been used, the four warp threads on the right side have been excluded from the weave for all twenty of the green weft threads in that section. The omission of these warp threads is not consistent with the remainder of the weave pattern. There are other apparent inconsistencies involving the omission of warp threads, skipped stitches, very loose or very tight areas of tension in the weave of the textile. The pattern of the weave varies every 10-40 weft threads with no apparent consistency in pattern order or number of weft threads in a pattern.

These qualities in the weave of the textile suggest two things about the hands that have woven this textile. First this suggests that the weaving has been carried out by more than one person. Although there is a certain amount of variance that occurs when a person is working with fibers by hand, there is still a consistency in those variance. That is to say, the weight of a person's touch: whether they have gentle loose weave or they are more heavy handed and
tend to produce more tightly woven things is usually apparent throughout any errors or inconsistencies in an textile. The second conclusion that can be drawn from the nature of the weave is that some if not all of the weavers participating in this piece we at a novice level. Frequently dropping threads and struggling to negotiate the level of tension in one's own hand so as not to weave it into the textile are very common issue with newcomers to this skill. These factors lead me to believe this loom was used for teaching students to weave, not as a model as the original collection classification suggested.

Further, Dryad Ltd produced a leaflet manual for the assembly, threading, and weaving use of this loom and two others in 1951. It was called the Wendy Table Loom, W170. According to the leaflet, it was produced in five different sizes: 9”, 12”, 15”, and 20”. With this information, I would venture to say that this loom was produced in 1950s. Due to the fact that natural textile fibers tend to dry rot and break under constant tension after after several decades, I do not believe the textile to be from the same period as the loom. As there are several Dryad looms similar to this one for sale on various re-sale websites, such as Amazon and Ebay, and Dryad Handicrafts was the largest supplier for handicraft supplies in the world by 1936, this was likely as mass produced loom (Leicester Lit. & Phil. Society).

In the early 20th century, the cotton industry was going through major advancements and a shift toward automatic looms. Despite Britain’s slow move toward the automatic loom relative to the US, changes were happening (Lazonick 1983: 198). In 1914, one to two percent of industrial cotton looms were automatic in Britain and by 1936: three percent, followed by 12% in 1955 (ibid). These statistics suggest that by this point in history,
production of hand looms in Britain, would likely have been on the decline. Concurrent with this transition in the industrial cotton industry, after the close of World War II, a revival of hand weaving gained momentum and loom design and materials evolved into finer crafts (Broudy 1979: 162). Contemporary looms were now constructed carefully with the finest straight grain woods (ibid). In addition to these historical factors, the weaving process on a table loom tends to be slower than that of a floor loom with a treadle system. Thus, the loom in UCL's collection was likely created for home rather than commercial use.

The fact that this loom is of the hand loom variety, draws a compelling line to its intended use in the home and an observation made by the Finnish architect and theorist, Juhani Pallasmaa regarding the privatization of the sense of touch. He suggests that sight has become privileged as a social sense over touch, touch now being relegated to an “archaic sensory remnant 'with merely private function'” (Pallasmaa 1996: 29) (Mitchell 1997: 161). This shift of the process of making, during Industrialization, from the home to the work and then from manual to industrial likely aided partially in the privatization of the sense of touch.

However, the sense of touch, no matter how it is or is not privileged, is an integral part of the process of weaving. Tim Ingold discussed the idea that “whatever the practitioner does to things is grounded in an attentive, perceptual involvement with them” (Ingold 2000: 65). From this statement, we can return to the discussion of the inconsistencies in the tension of the weave of the textile on this loom. When weaving or working with any thread based handicraft, the tension in the hands is transferred directly, first into the gestural process of weaving and then to the product of each individual row of woven warp and weft threads.
Thus when a weaver is at odds with the material and the process, whether it be because they are new to it or because they had bad day, their product becomes reflective of that relationship. Ingold also discusses skilled actions' narrative qualities, but I suggest that unskilled action can also have narrative qualities as it does in this case (ibid). The unskilled actions of the weavers do not create a personal narrative, but rather a rare universal human narrative: the narrative of the novice. Reflected in the missed warp threads, overly tight patches of weft threads, and neatly executed chevron like patterns that appear in this textile piece is the narrative of new beginnings and the unavoidable missteps and the occasional triumphs that come with that process.

No matter what level a weaver has achieved, the process of weaving is a sensory experience. The sound of the shuttle as it slides across the threads of the shed and the slap of the beater against the recently woven weft threads are part of the rhythmic song of weaving. The threads vibrate, ever so slightly as the shuttle passes through the shed. If one's attention is focused they can feel it, in their finger tips. The beating of the weft always sends a slight shudder through the entire loom, not matter what its size. Even the nose is stimulated in the process, for whatever fiber is being work releases its scent into the nostrils of the weaver as they lean over the threads. The process is innately phenomenological; and the weaving the process becomes the primary objective as the product builds slowly before the eyes. Weaving, however, is not a process that can only be experienced by the weaver. The observer also has a multi-sensory experience when participating in the process. As Ingold points out, making is simply a modality of weaving (Ingold 2000: 65).
The act of weaving and observing weaving is enacted through this small loom. It sits silently in dimly lit corner of the Material Culture Collection room on top of a file cabinet, but still it manages to call to anyone who will listen with their eyes first and then with their whole body. Ingold argues that the more objects are removed from their context, the more the process disappears behind the product (Ingold 2000:64). It seems Ingold would be concerned that the weaving mechanism has been privileged over the mechanics of weaving. The state of this loom, mildly damaged, but with a partially completed textile still attached to the frame, allows it to surpass this pitfall. The fact that a relic of the process of weaving, complete with novice narrative, is still present with and upon the weaving mechanism makes this artefact and evocative piece of material culture that will enchant the unwary passerby.
Bibliography


Dryad Ltd. (1951) Dryad Leaflet No. 89: How to Weave on Fourway Looms, Leicester: Dryad Press.


