

Jen Berwin: samples as visual art and valuable archive

Last October, fellow weaver Lou Cabeen and I visited the Weavers' School in Coupeville, Washington, to scan more than 250 images of what we came to affectionately call “an intuitive archive” from the extensive collection of old guild and study-group sample notebooks stored there. The summer prior, I had poured with pleasure over nearly eight shelf feet of assorted three-ring binders during weaving class breaks, photographed the woven samples casually, and planned to return.

Textiles are relatively easy to clean and can be preserved with minimal care, but these old notebooks are particularly susceptible to deterioration. The unflattering effects of time, unstable chemistry, and insects are having their way with them after five or so decades of shelf life. Acidic paper yellows, dyes and oils on the fibers slowly stain the neighboring paper, old glue and tape turn amber-colored and brittle, edges tatter, hole punches tear and give way, and the staples (conservators dread them because they rust) will be the next to go. Unlike all the other carefully cleaned and protected textiles in the studio, the bits of woven cloth are quite vulnerable to moth invasion, stapled into the private recesses of a binder.

The notebooks are really inspiring works of visual art. Lovingly compiled, they have a scrapbook-like cut and collaged aesthetic; the page composition is marvelous with scissored and hand-placed typewriter text and hand-drawn diagrams of structure. The pages come alive with physical, tactile bits of actual cloth stapled in to “read.” In most cases, the threading, tie-up, and treadling notation accompanies the sample, and typically a couple of paragraphs of expository prose follow as well. I relate my love of weaving samples to the sort

of pleasure I take in reading recipes or poems; I value their condensed, carefully considered, specific craft, and the tremendous sense of possibility they inspire.

I have particular fondness for the tone of the writing and how it varies. Each weaver brings her gifts to the record. The super competent professional technical tone predominates—the writer who gives a comprehensive historic context for a technique, teaches terminology, and offers structural variations.

Though most samples are unattributed, the annotated ones often have quite a bit of social nuance to them. Some entries accurately and unselfconsciously capture the state of technology at the time—as well as cultural relations at a particular moment: “When the material was woven, Margaret [Lawrence] washed it with Ivory Flakes in her automatic washer, using the blanket cycle. There was slight shrinkage. She pressed it on her mangle ironer, running the material through many times, with the ironer temperature warm. When the material was dry, she had the tailor make it into the good-looking coat which her husband, Roger, wore at one of our meetings when he was a guest.”

Sample notebooks such as these are an invaluable textile inheritance, a unique record of independent scholarship, experimentation, innovation, and dialogue among weavers. They document the common reference points and concerns of weavers; catalog their expert delving into different weave structures, color combinations, textures and materials; and record a tremendous breadth of social and historical context in the writing. I hope today’s weavers will take key steps now to document and preserve their own collections as well as those languishing in guild libraries and schools. These increasingly fragile documents that once served to bridge

weavers at a geographical remove between meetings have the capacity to bridge weavers at a temporal remove if properly preserved now, while it’s still possible. 

