

A NOTE ON TEXTILE CRAFTS

by

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From antiquity to the last part of the eighteenth century, the conversion of fibers into materials was a handcraft. Wool fibers may have been the first textile material to be used by man to clothe himself. The felting of wool may have been suggested by the matting that results when pelts are worn with the wool or hair side toward the body; however, it was the spinning of fibers and the weaving of them into cloth that was to have the widest application. Until power-driven machines came into being, spinning was a household industry, and there are still many areas of the world where one can see women carrying a distaff of wool in one hand while twirling the spindle of thread in the other—Indians in the Andes Mountains of South America to cite but one example. Weaving is another craft that is referred to in the earliest literature and one can still watch craftsmen treading their looms in Ireland and other countries.

Spinning and weaving are handcrafts associated with our

country's past. Examples of such work can be seen at the current exhibition of the Copp family textiles in the Museum of History and Technology where daily, during the lunch hour, demonstrations are given on a replica of an early nineteenth-century loom.

Although the tools to convert fibers into yarns and threads changed with time—from hand to machine—the process is the same. There is first the cleaning and aligning of the fibers, then drawing them out and twisting them, and finally winding up the finished yarn. The machine to straighten or card the wool fibers was perfected by the 1770s and introduced into the United States in 1793. It was not uncommon for people to have their wool carded by machine, although they would then take it home to spin with the common or great wheel. Wool was not commonly spun by machinery until the second decade of the nineteenth century. About this time, the power loom was introduced and full factory production of wool cloth began.

The spinning of wool with a simple wheel continued during the nineteenth century, however, especially in the rural areas and in the expanding West. Most frequently handweaving was done by a professional weaver, except in isolated areas. But the powered machines for carding, spinning, and weaving continued to be improved, making factory-produced cloth cheap enough for everyone.

Despite the technological advances in machines for the processing of wool, silk, cotton, and the synthetics, there has been an upsurge by various people and groups in going back to the handcrafts of yesteryear either for artistic expression, for their own pleasure, or for financial benefit.

THE COPP FAMILY TEXTILES: A CENTURY OF NEW ENGLAND DOMESTIC MANUFACTURES, exhibition. Sponsored by the Division of Textiles, Museum of History and Technology, First Floor, Special Exhibition Area.

SPINNING AND WEAVING DEMONSTRATIONS DAILY, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.