

# A WEAVER'S Path

by Bhakti Ziek

I've reached my mid-forties. Much to my amazement, I've learned getting older is nice. I now have a history; and, with the understanding of my personal history and what that means, I can finally relate to world history. With this new gift of hindsight, I look back on my early forays into weaving, and wonder, if, indeed, there was a plan, engineered by my guardian spirit? What seemed a terribly contorted journey, as it was experienced, looked at from the perspective of time and history, now appears continuous and almost straight.

My search to know and understand weaving has taken me to many places around the world; to study with many teachers; to read many books; and, to sit for hours alone at my loom.

In 1987, I went to study at Cranbrook Academy of Art. Almost 20 years after I had first applied there and been rejected, I was able to go and live out a dream. The reality was different than the myth. It was more than I could have hoped for; it changed my life irrevocably. I was nervous about change. I feared that because I was a weaver I would be encouraged to leave the loom, to go from two-dimensional flat work to three-dimensional sculptural forms. Education in the Fiber Department at Cranbrook is very much about a personal quest; it is finding yourself and placing yourself in a larger context that extends from the past into the future.

My essential discovery was that I loved fabric: fabric that was strong, pliable and carried a cultural significance and fabric that told marital narratives from India, Coptic tunics,

the tapestries of Angers! It wasn't one structure or yarn or color that held my attention, rather, it was an attitude. Once I recognized the type of cloth that was magical for me, cloth that unleashed dreams, hope and passion in me, then I began my studies to create such a cloth. There was still the question of whether it was possible for someone in my culture to create such a cloth, but now I have found a lineage. I aligned myself with weavers across national boundaries and time restrictions, linked by a sensibility and reverence manifested through cloth.

In my *Wheel of Life* series, I have tried to situate individuals, with their personal histories, within the larger framework of the species, the planet and the universe. *Wheel of Life: The Passing on of Knowledge* is the third weaving in the series. Six panels form a semi-circle. As viewers circle the piece, interpreting the several narratives that intertwine, they unconsciously mimic the underlying theme of an endless wheel of life spinning through time.

Through several narrative methods, via a medium that evokes a sense of security and protection, I have tried to remind the viewer that our lives can be seen from many perspectives at one time. An enlarged vision of ourselves, within the greater context of the universe, may be the only hope for the survival of this planet. Cloth has been the context for allegory and teaching in past times. I hope to be part of the movement that continues this tradition for the good of all beings.

My study of textiles in 1969 began with questions about how was it done. I was concerned with the making of

cloth, not even aware of the possibilities of its meaning and significance. I have never left behind my appetite for the how-to. My repertoire of technology expanded. Because I was able to use a computerized loom, my understanding of structures grew and I simulated jacquard fabric.

The bands of narrative in *Wheel of Life: Washer Woman Revelation* were created by picking various structures across the web of the cloth. Although this method provided many possibilities from the same warp threads, I missed the freedom of color possibilities attained with painted warps. In *Wheel of Life: Three Generations* I returned to that format, introducing a lampas structure to organize the threads. In *Wheel of Life: The Passing on of Knowledge* I incorporated methodologies new and old to me. The lampas organized painted wefts, dyed or discharged braided warp effects and weft brocade.

## Weft Painting

The weft painting was an adaptation of weft ikat I learned from my friend and colleague, Elizabeth Billings. This information is presented in Jun and Noriko Tomita's book, *Japanese Ikat Weaving* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982). The process that I used to get the animals and pelt markings into my cloth was based on *e-gasuri*, picture weft ikat. In the traditional method, a guide thread was stretched on a picture board (a type of frame) and the image was then painted. Then this thread was stretched out, the image breaking down into a series of seemingly random dots and dashes. This was the guide used to tie a bunch of weft threads to achieve a repeated motif



in the weaving. Since I didn't want a repeat or even duplicate images, I painted the thread and wove directly with it.

To begin, I first had to have a picture board that held the weft as I painted it. The picture board was essentially a rectangular open frame with three stable sides. The fourth side adjusted so that the space between it and its opposing side equaled the width of the weft. Each side has an open-ended reed sitting in it. I had cut an old reed in half, placing the open-edge up. The width reflected the actual length of weft from selvedge to selvedge and not the width of the cloth, which was less.

To measure the length of the weft meant setting up the warp first and throwing a few shots of weft in the actual structure. I marked the edge points, unwove the weft and measured. Because of the take-up of warp and weft interlacing, the weft measured 15-1/4 inches, while the cloth itself only measured 15 inches. Using the correct measurement, I adjusted the sides of the board.

Once the frame was set up, the weft was wound on it, winding only enough to fit on a bobbin. I wound a bobbin with my weft and used that for my first section. Then I measured the height, using that to guide me. For example, if the weft filled up three inches of the reed, I wound on sections of three inches, before cutting and beginning again, leaving extra thread at the beginning and end of each section to begin and end the weft in the weaving. I tried to ritualize aspects of my work as an aid to knowing where I was in the process. In this case, I always started my weft at the left, ending at the right. The weft was wound on the board at the same density it was to be woven. If wound at 16 picks per inch but woven at 20 picks per inch, the image squashed. If wound at 16 picks per inch, but woven at 10 picks per inch, the image elongated. But wound at 16 picks per inch and woven at 16 picks per inch, the image turned out exactly as I planned.

I used black magic marker to mark the edges of the weft, an essential

step because these marks told me where to turn the weft for selvedge. To create the stencils used to paint the weft, the image was painted or drawn on tracing paper that is then sandwiched between two sheets of clear contact paper. A stencil was cut, following the traditions of using bridges so no area is too large an empty space. The bridges kept the image from flopping or wobbling as I painted into it. These contact paper stencils hold up and can be washed, cleaned and used repeatedly. I made one stencil per panel, each stencil being 44 inches high by 36 inches wide. Since my frame held about fifteen inches of weft at a time, I wound and painted that much, marking the stencil so I could accurately place it for the next section to be painted.

Because I wanted a strong black, not always attainable with dye, I chose to work with a pigment which air cured and needed no further processing. A word of caution: I did not use a respiratory mask and, as a result, suffered from nose bleeds for almost six months. It is important to follow safety measures when using pigment and dyes.

Because the yarn was a thick silk, and pigment does not penetrate like dye, I needed to paint both sides to ensure the color covered all sides of the yarn. Because the frame was open on both sides, I simply turned it over and followed the shadow of the first side.

Once the yarn dried, I put it directly on bobbins, numbering the bobbins to keep order. I wound onto the bobbin from top to bottom to begin weaving at the right end. Because I always started the section on the same side, I always began a bobbin from the same side of my cloth. While weaving, the back on the left side of the loom would hang in space later as the right side of the image. So, if I painted my image and began each bobbin section on the left, introducing it into the cloth from the right edge. I could not see the image forming as I wove, since it worked as a back pick in the lampas structure. The only guide I had was to follow the

edge markings made before painting my image. I was very careful to have these markings line up at each selvedge. What great joy and relief, I felt when I saw animals as I took the first panel off the loom!

### **Braiding As Resist**

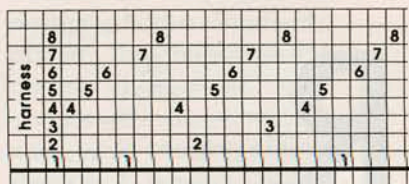
For the other side of each panel, I wanted colored stripes, but I wanted a dye effect that had some nuance of color. When visiting the Center for Creative Studies in Detroit, I noted that several students had warps with mottled areas of color, almost like a random ikat effect. I was told that they first braided then dyed the warp, the braid acting as a resist. Intrigued, I went back to school and tried it. I experimented with even groups of threads and uneven groups, with an even tight tension and with an uneven, varying tension. For my series, I used a three-element braid. There were no tricks to master, but it was a time-consuming process. Sometimes, it took six hours to make a braid, and another six hours to undo it. Each braid yielded between a quarter to one inch of warp. I made warps long enough to weave three panels of my piece. While braiding, rubber bands held the excess yarn in bundles, making handling easy, but, I needed a work area that allowed me to step back as the braid got longer. My wrists got tired. I found the braiding to be rather repetitive and tedious, but, the results were worthwhile.

### **Lampas**

Lampas is one of those fashionable structures that suddenly everyone wants to try. My understanding of this structure came from Milton Sunday's essay, "Pattern and Weaves: Safavid Lampas and Velvet," in *Woven from the Soul, Spun from the Heart* (edited by Carol Bier, The Textile Museum, Washington, D.C., 1987). Lampas is a compound weave involving two warps. One warp acts as a ground warp and the other acts to tie down the pattern wefts. Weaving, as I do, the two warps simultaneously with the ground weft creates an integrated cloth. Weaving the warps separately



Illustration 1. Threading



continued

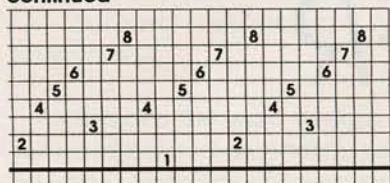
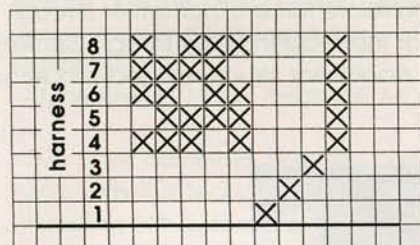
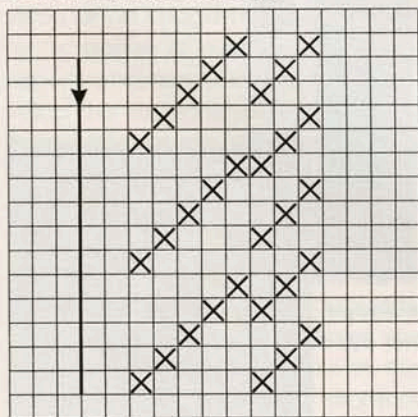


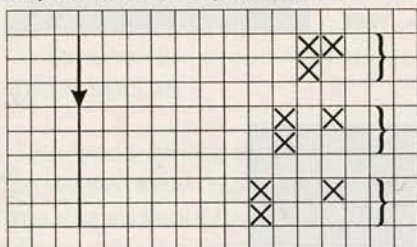
Illustration 2. Tie-up and Treading Sequence



Sequence for ground cloth



Sequences used for pattern wefts



creates a type of double cloth. The two warps can be threaded and lifted to create any structure.

For *Wheel of Life: The Passing on of Knowledge*, I used an 8-harness loom, choosing to combine a 4,1 satin (ground warp) with a 1,2 twill (tie-

down warp), the ground warp being denser and heavier than the tie-down warp. This was my threading: harnesses 1 to 3 were used for the tie-down warp and harnesses 4 to 8 were used for the ground warp.

The warps were beamed on separate beams. Getting the tension right was one of the tricks of this structure. The tie-down warp needed to be under less tension to accommodate all the different pattern wefts.

The ground warp needed to be tied-up and treadled in a sequence to weave a 4,1 satin. At the same time the tie-down warp needed to be tied-up and treadled in a sequence to weave a 1,2 twill. The ground harnesses were tied-up on one peddle so they could be lifted when needed.

Since I wove both warps with my ground weft, I used two peddles at the same time. I treadled through the five-step sequence with one foot, and through the three-step sequence with the other foot. It took 15 picks before returning to the beginning. Because the tie-down warp was thin, and dispersed more than the ground warp, it was hidden in the weaving. After a shot of ground weft I threw the pattern wefts.

In Safavid lampas from the 16th century Persian dynasty, weavers used as many as five-pattern wefts across the web of the cloth. The tie-down warp worked structurally with these wefts; the ground warp worked to reveal or hide the pattern weft. If the ground warp was lifted at the same time that the tie-down warp was lifted, the pattern weft was woven on the back of the cloth. If only the tie-down warp was raised, the pattern weft was woven on the front of the cloth. It was important to raise the same tie-down warp that was lifted with the ground warp in the ground structure, so the pattern weft could beat down and cover the ground pick.

I picked across the cloth, raising and lowering the ground warp, keeping the tie-down warp consistently up. A pattern weft showed on the front and then on the back. If only two-pattern wefts were used, they worked on opposites—one on top

while the other on back, and vice versa. But if three or more wefts were used for pattern, only one appeared at any point on the front, while in the back there were two or more wefts running in the shed. This was why the tie-down warp needed to be tensioned differently than the ground to accommodate all the wefts.

In my weaving, because I wanted to economize yarn and didn't need elements to repeat across the width of the cloth, I chose to brocade my pattern wefts. If I needed areas of similar color in close proximity, I raised the ground to hide the pattern weft as it moved from one area to the other. But if I needed isolated areas, I used that weft in a specific area, using the tie-down warp to tie-down the brocading weft. Then I raised all the ground warp, keeping the same shed with the tie-down warp, throwing my back pick of painted weft.

To summarize, the sequence of picks was to raise both warps and throw a ground weft. For example, harnesses 1, 4, 6, 7, 8 would lift. I alternated lifting harness 1 alone with 1 and 4-8. If I wanted to weave three-pattern wefts, selvedge to selvedge that appeared on the surface in different areas, I used this combination of 1 alone and 1 with 4 through 8 for each of these three-pattern wefts. I raised harness 1 and 4 through 8, throwing my back pick of painted weft.

The next sequence involved the tie-down warp with ground warp (harnesses 2, 4, 5, 6, 7), throwing my ground weft. I alternated the tie-down warp (harness 2) with tie-down warp and all the ground warp (harnesses 2 and 4 through 8). I used my pattern wefts and the tie-down alone (harness 2) where I wanted that pattern weft to appear on the surface. I used the tie-down warp with all the ground warp (harnesses 2 and 4 through 8) where I wanted the pattern weft hidden. I then followed this with the tie-down warp and all the ground warp (harnesses 2 and 4 through 8) to throw my back weft. ❧

Editor's note: see related photos in *Weaver/Storyteller*, page 26.



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Cover: Ed Rossbach. Homage to  
Japan, 1970. Plain weave, warp  
and weft ikat. See story on page 10.

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Sandra Brownlee Ramsdale.  
*New Weaving, 1990.*

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