

Some Ancient Peruvian Textiles

BY MARY M. ATWATER

WE OF THE MODERN TIME, with our radios and automobiles, our aeroplanes and air-conditioned houses, are inclined to a certain feeling of pity for those who lived before us in the far distances of time. We think of them as crude and simple. But—were they?

The modern craftsman who studies in some museum the scraps and fragments of ancient art that have come down to us from the old time is apt to come away from that study with a new humility and a new respect for the dignity and infinite variety of his art. His own efforts may appear crude and childish as compared with the intricate beauty, fineness and precision of things made for ordinary daily use by the skillful hands of "poor ignorant savages" and the craftsmen of forgotten civilizations.

"Art is long,"—before the dawn of history it was already old. There can be no "progress" in art as there is in science, for art is not a building up of bits of knowledge. It is the satisfaction of that hunger for beauty that is one of the deepest needs of the human heart. Who can define beauty? Beauty cannot be rationalized or reduced to a formula,—it can only be felt. The more we discuss beauty and are learned and intellectual about it, the further we are away from it. We become timid and distrustful of our own instinctive reactions, and we wait for some "expert" to tell us whether or not a thing is beautiful before we venture to admire. We are in art a little like the unfortunate centipede who found it impossible to walk after he was asked to explain how he could manage so many feet at once. We can't just take a lump of clay or a strand of colored yarns and produce beauty instinctively as the "ignorant savage" can—and does.

But perhaps out of our fumbblings and uncertainties a new art will be born. It is interesting to note that many of the decorative forms we label "modernistic" and "new art" today are curiously akin to the patterns of primitive decoration. And this does not appear to be due to imitation, but to be the outgrowth of the fresh, new attitude toward art apparent in these thrilling times. This seems to me to prove that these decorative forms are somehow fundamental—that they express something basic in human nervous structure and in our instinctive reactions to the world we live in.

To the ancient craftsmen many of these decorative forms—perhaps all of them—were symbols of definite meanings. But a symbol is not invented out-of-hand, it must grow out of an inherent relation between form and meaning. And though the old forms may not mean to us exactly what they meant to the ancients, they have an amazing force far deeper than words.

In the remarkable modern apotheosis of the swastica we have a case in point—an ancient symbol that has suddenly blazed into new and tremendous power.

We can rationalize and intellectualize and complicate life as much as we please, but in spite of all that we are still primitives at heart—human beings, living and working in a world of mystery.

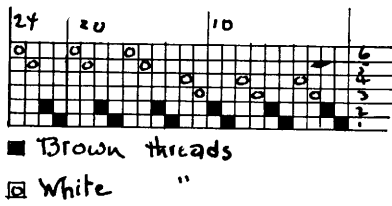
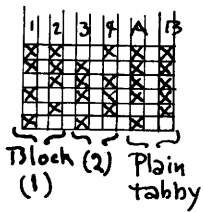
The art of weaving is one of the oldest among the arts of man. It is so old that there has been nothing basically new in it for almost two thousand years,—for the mere harnessing of power to do our work has made no basic change in the art itself. Modern machinery has never produced linens as fine as the incredibly filmy linens of ancient Egypt, nor any fabrics more gorgeous than the ancient brocades of China. Perhaps there will never again be anything basically new in weaving. For all that, it is new every year, like a tree that puts out new leaves and flowers every spring. There is, I think, great joy in having a part in so ancient and so beautiful an art.

Among the ancient craftsmen in our art the weavers of old Peru hold a proud place. Many examples of their craft have survived and may be found in museums, though little or nothing is known of the history of their times. These ancient weavers were amazingly versatile. Among their weavings we find "double" fabrics similar in construction to the famous double-woven coverlets of Colonial days, though usually much more elaborate in design; also a form of double-face weave, four-ply, similar in structure to the web produced by the card-weaving process but probably not made by that method. Also gauze fabrics—from simple to extremely complex, resembling sometimes pillow lace. Tapestry, of course—the tapestry technique appears common to all ages and all countries. Also some astonishing embroideries, and many very elaborate forms of braiding in which hundreds of strands are combined. There are, besides, many weaves that appear to be peculiar to ancient Peru.

I have recently been studying some of these marvels in a very interesting and beautiful book, "Textiles Anciens du Pérou," by Raoul d'Harcourt. The notes are in French, but the fine plates would prove interesting, without the notes, to any weaver.

The book, unfortunately, gives no information about the loom or looms used by these weavers. Possibly this is something that nobody knows. When I lived in South America a number of years ago, I observed Indians weaving blankets and ponchos, but as I knew nothing of weaving at the time I did not make detailed notes. I have greatly regretted the lost opportunity. The "looms" I saw in use consisted of nothing but a warp pegged out flat on the ground; the sheds were produced by a system of shed-sticks, and the weaver worked squatting over the warp in what appeared a very inconvenient manner. It seems likely, however, that the ancient weavers worked in much the same way.

Pattern (a)

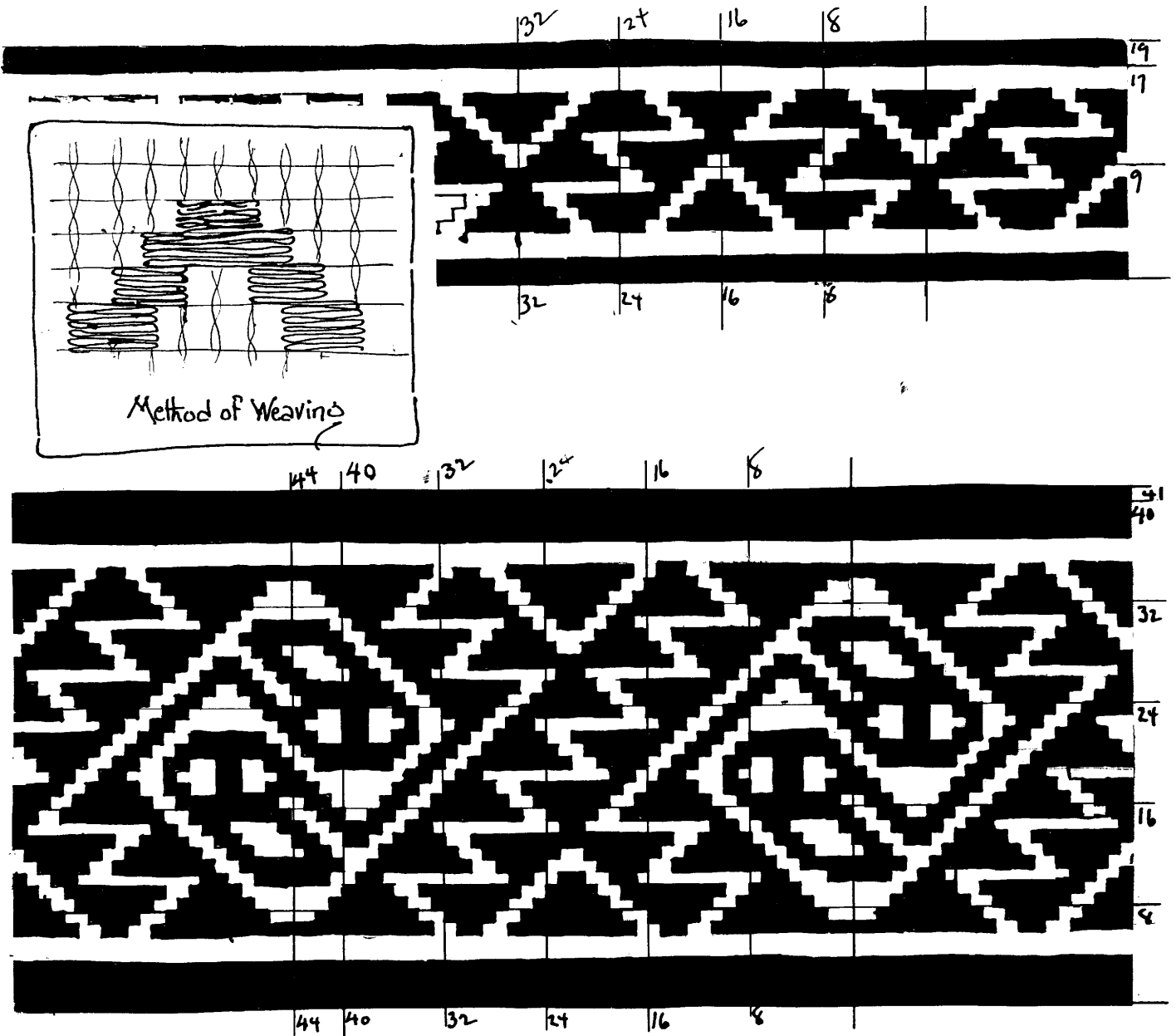


An Ancient Peruvian Weave

Modern American weavers would not care for this method of weaving, but of course the mechanism used for making the sheds makes no difference in the end-result, and is

merely a matter of greater or less convenience. Many of the ancient Peruvian weaves can be translated for use on our modern hand-looms, and some of these adaptations are given here in the hope that they will prove of interest to modern hand-weavers.

One odd weave that appears to be peculiar to the ancient Peruvians consists of plain tabby, in which each figure of the design has a separate warp and weft. These warps and wefts interlock along all the edges of the blocks. Just how this web was produced one can only guess. Most of the designs in this weave are very simple, composed of square blocks of different colors. In some pieces the squares were apparently woven separately and sewed together in the manner of patchwork, but each patch was made in the size and



Borders in Tapestry over Gauze — after d'Harcourt

Pattern (b)

shape desired, with selvages all around. This weave is mentioned because it might afford an interesting "community project" for a school class. The separate squares could be woven on little frames set with small nails, the weft being put in with a tape-needle.

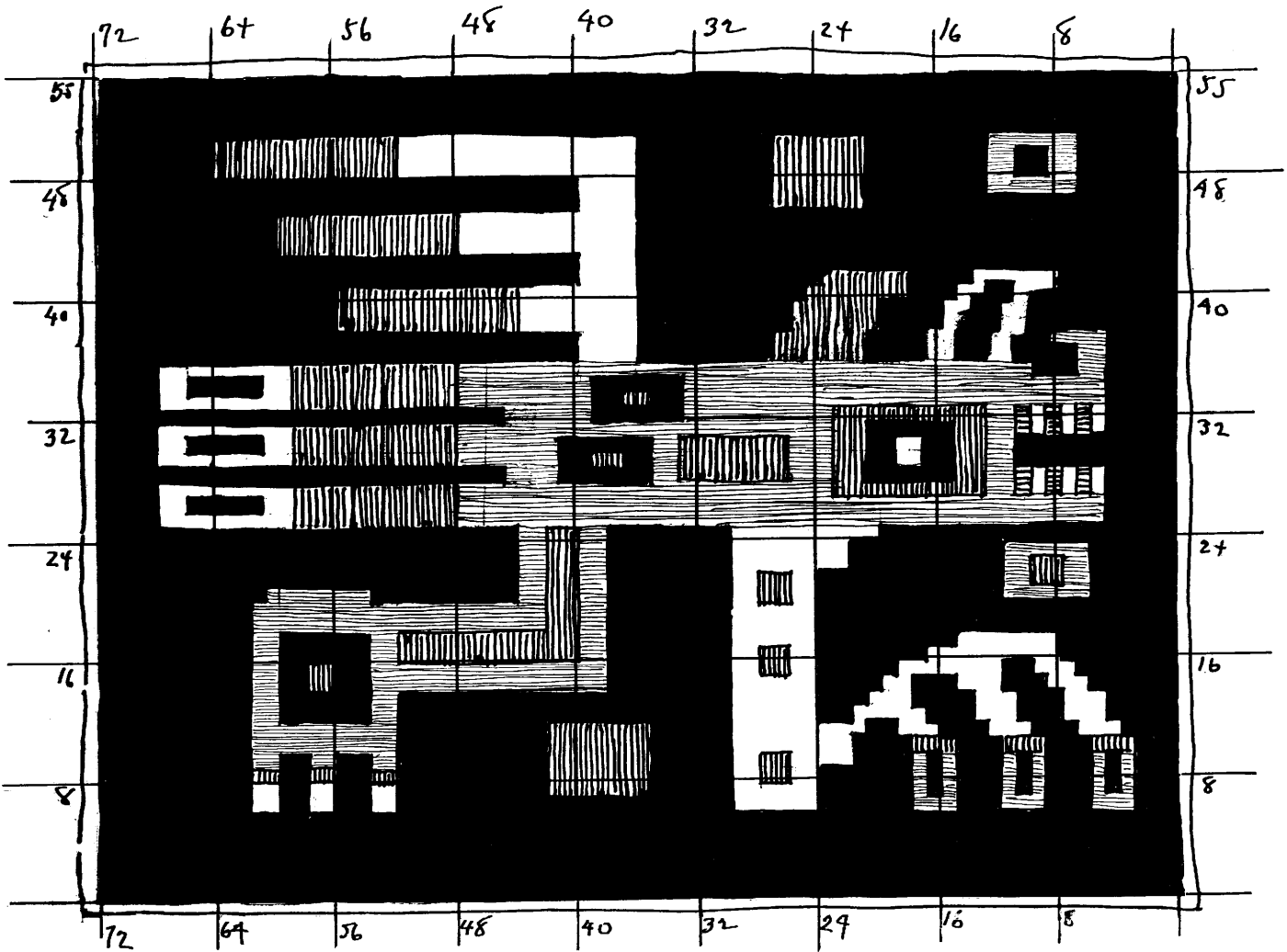
A simple, but effective fabric—suitable for bags and upholstery—is shown at (a) of the diagram. It produces alternating squares of tabby and "rep," the rep squares showing three narrow lines in contrasting color. The wrong side of this fabric shows long floats of pattern-warp, so this would not be a good weave for a piece in which both sides of the fabric are in evidence. The warp for this should be set twice as close as for tabby weaving. That is, the brown foundation threads should be set as for plain tabby. The white threads, which may be of a somewhat coarser material, are introduced along with the other warp. Suppose, for instance, that the foundation material is linen floss and the white threads a fairly heavy wool yarn: sley a linen thread and a wool thread through each dent of a 15-dent reed. Treadle the first square on treadles 1 and 2 alternately, and the second

square on treadles 3 and 4 alternately. All weft-shots should be in the material of the foundation-warp.

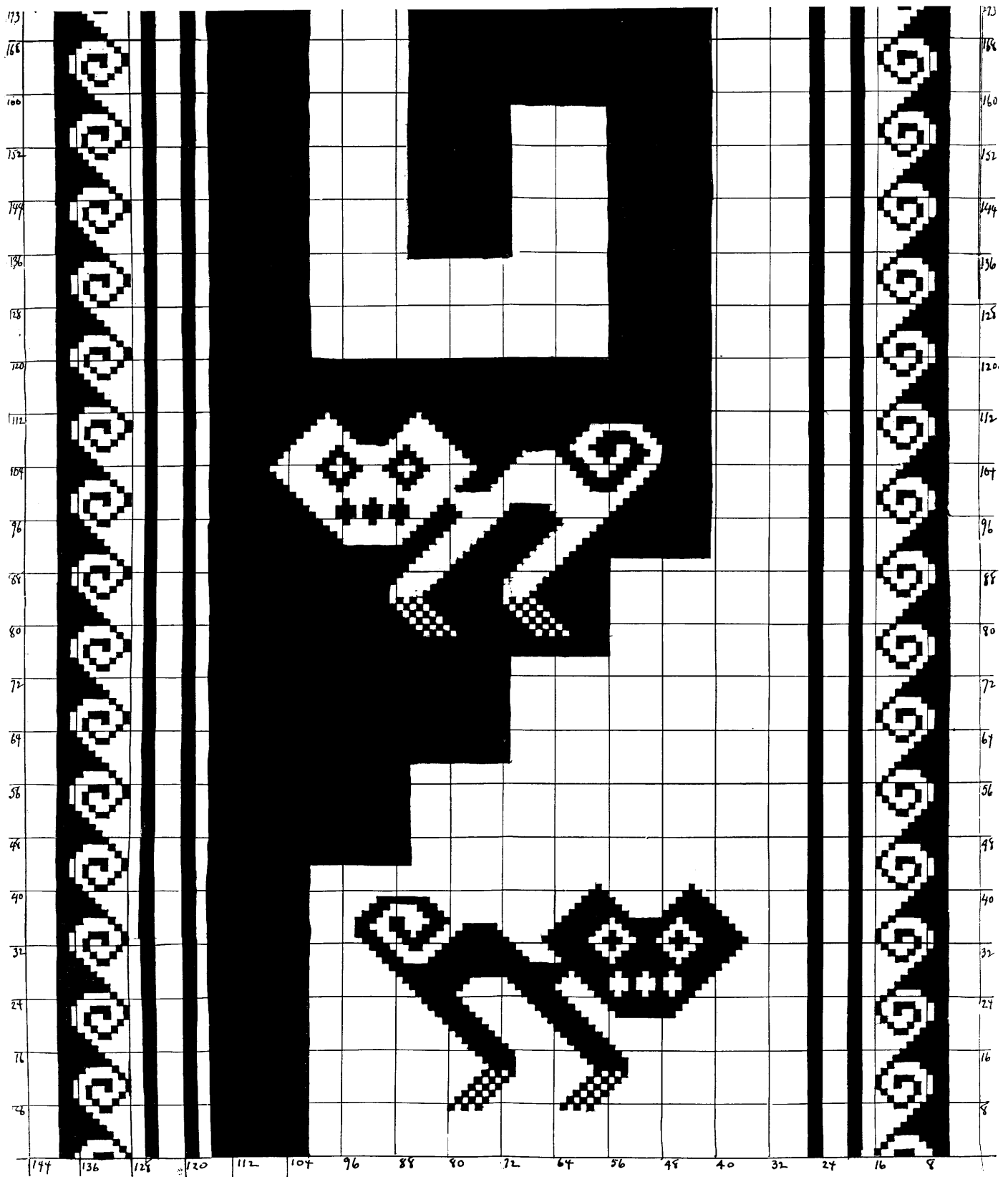
The original of this weave is shown on Plate XXV, 2 and 3, of the d'Harcourt book, and the original fabric according to the notes is in cotton about the weight of a 10/2, set at 36 ends to the inch. This makes a rather small figure, and for upholstery the coarser linen and wool fabric suggested above would be more effective.

Treadles A and B as shown on the diagram weave plain tabby all across, and these treadles are used only for the ends. These ties might be omitted.

An interesting weave that appears to be peculiar to the Peruvian weavers is composed of a plain gauze foundation overlaid with pattern weaving in tapestry. The effect is unusual and handsome and could be used with splendid results for curtains. To make plain gauze, in which each pair of threads is twisted together, is simple enough, though it requires, of course, a special gauze harness. For the tapestry work each pair of threads should also be threaded as for plain tabby, on two additional harnesses.



Figure—"Male Condor"—from a Peruvian Tapestry—after d'Harcourt
Pattern (c)

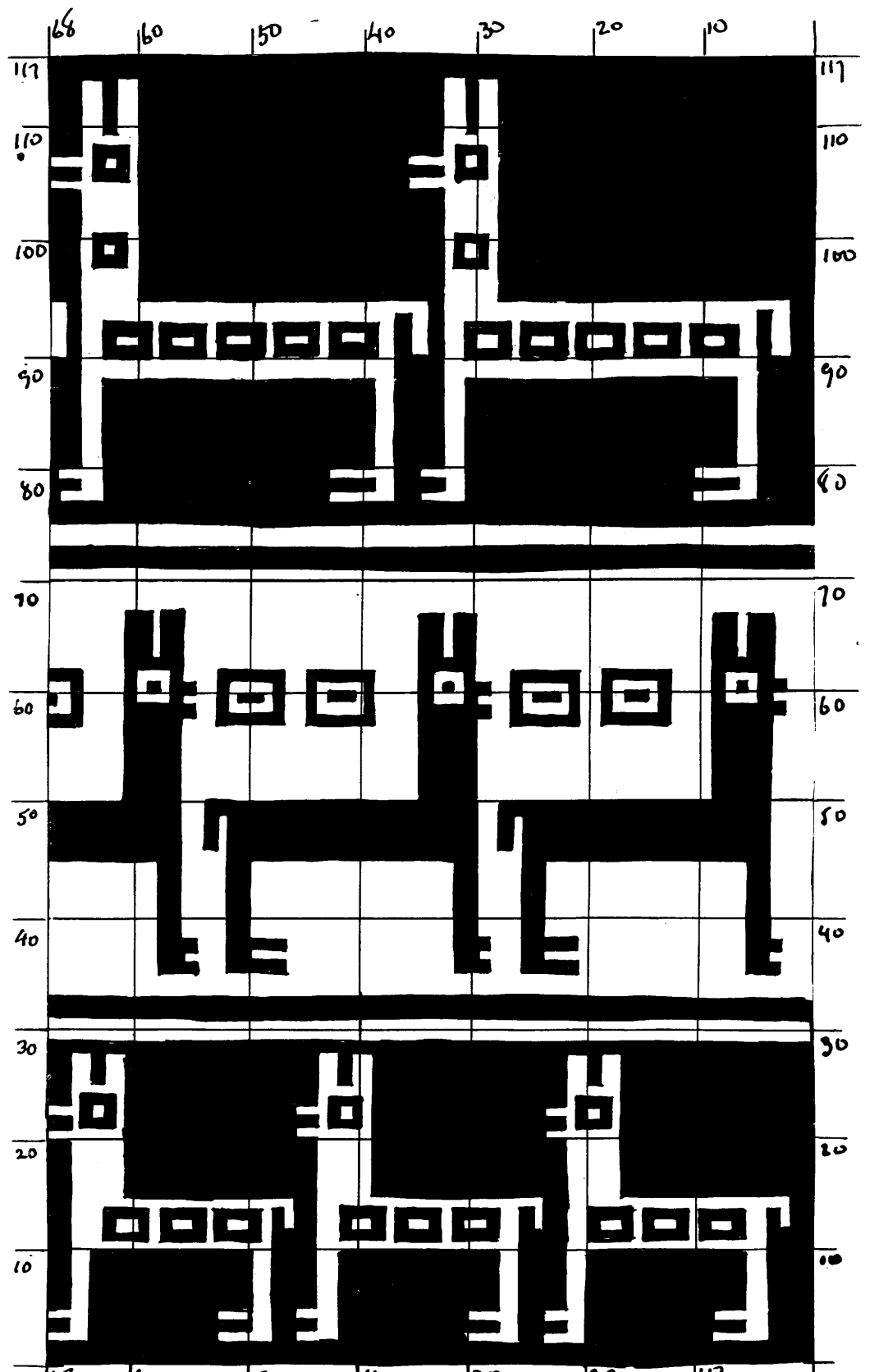


Ancient Peruvian Double Weaving—after d'Harcourt—
 Pattern (d)

The pattern shown at (b) of the diagram is for this type of weaving, each square of the design corresponding to two warp-threads—one pair of the gauze weave. This pattern is from the piece shown on Plate XI, 2, of the d'Harcourt book. The original, according to the notes, is in natural cream color, the warp in cotton and the tapestry in wool. The warp-setting is 30 ends to the inch. For curtains a wider spacing of the warp would be more effective. The figure represents the heads of pelicans, much stylized.

The handsome bird at (c) of the diagram is from a tapestry piece done in alternate squares of light and dark. The bird as sketched appears on the dark squares. On the light squares the same bird appears, but with the body omitted. Some of the birds are headed in the opposite direction, and there are some slight variations from one figure to another. According to the notes, the creature is a "male condor," and the colors used in the piece are: dark blue, light blue, red, violet, green and yellow. Just what the symbolism of the bodyless bird may be, the notes fail to explain.

Perhaps the most interesting of the ancient Peruvian pieces are those in double weaving. How they were woven appears to be unknown, but the patterns lend themselves readily to the four-harness "Finnweave" technique described in a recent issue of the HANDICRAFTER. Pattern (d) is an arrangement for this weave after the fascinating piece shown on Plate XXVIII of the d'Harcourt book. The original is in beige and brown cotton, quite fine. The total width of the piece is given in



Processions of Llamas, in Double Weaving, from an Ancient Peruvian Bag—after d'Harcourt
 Pattern (e)



Method of Braiding Pattern (f)

the notes as six inches. It takes little imagination to see in this design a representation of day and night, enlivened by a delightfully horrific creature of the cat-variety. The interlocking light and dark "key" figure is a decorative form that appears again and again in the Peruvian decorations. The little running border might have come from the Greek. The simplicity and rhythm of this design seem to me superb.

The processions of light and dark llamas shown on pattern (e) are also delightful in their placid dignity. This pattern is from a bag with a long braided handle shown on Plate XXX of the d'Harcourt book. The original is in carmine wool and white cotton, the warp being set at fifty ends to the inch. The braided handle is in a rather simple flat braid in several colors and there is also a slender round braided thong of interesting construction and unexplained purpose attached to one side of the bag. The top of the bag is finished in coarse needle-work in two colors, and the side-seams are similarly finished.

The d'Harcourt book is a real treasure to the handweaver. It contains many more fascinating patterns adaptable to modern weaving than the few selected for illustration with this article,—open-work patterns that could be executed in the Spanish open-work weave, fascinating patterns for embroidery, and the truly marvellous braiding—but space is lacking to describe them all.

A useful flat braid, easy to make and excellent for braided belts, is sketched at (f). As many strands may be used as desired for width, but the ends should be in multiples of four, eight or twelve. The strands are braided singly from right to left and in groups from left to right, as indicated on the sketch. The effect is diagonal bands of color. This braid appears in the d'Harcourt book on Plate LVI, No. 2. The original is composed, according to the notes, of nine groups of twenty-four threads each, and these are divided into two strands of twelve threads each on the return, but it is easier to use a coarser material in bands of eight threads divided in fours on the return. The colors of the original are: yellow, red, violet, prunc, dark green and dark blue. The much more elaborate piece shown at No. 3 of the same plate is similar in technique though much more complicated to execute, and I will not attempt a description.

In making this braid I find the simplest technique is to pick up alternate threads all across, omitting the group of four at the extreme left-hand edge. This forms a shed through which the heavy strand may be drawn. Of course from time to time the strands emerging at the right must be braided back singly over succeeding coarse strands. The braiding should be close and even, and produces a firm and heavy fabric excellent for a belt or—when made narrow—for handles for a bag.

The d'Harcourt book will be found in many libraries, and it is hoped that the examples given here will inspire readers to consult this book for themselves and discover the many other marvels that the book contains.

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