

Questions and Answers

by MARY M. ATWATER

A great many questions relating to the sale of hand-woven fabrics come to me every week: "What are the chances of making my weaving a source of profit?" "If I go in for the making of coverlets, like the ancient ones, how and where can I sell them? And what price do they sell for?" "I like to weave, and people admire my work. It occurs to me I might sell my things and so add to the family income. Will you please tell me where and how to sell my weaving?" "I want to weave as a business — what kind of thing sells best and returns the best profit?"

It is difficult to answer these questions because the craft is not at present organized on a commercial basis and there are no large, well-established, sales-agencies for the handling of hand-woven fabrics. It is true that many people are making a profitable occupation of weaving, either in part time or as a full-time business, but these weavers have built up their own sales outlets. At present this appears to be the only practical way to attack the problem.

It is, in my opinion, absolutely essential in weaving for profit to select some special "line" and to develop that exclusively. No one can hope to make a profit by weaving this and that as fancy dictates — a rug this week, two or three little bags next week, a few linen pieces, — no two the same size or shape — in the week after that — trusting to luck to find a buyer. Pin-money, perhaps, by selling to one's neighbors and friends, but not a business.

To make a profit both the production and sales must be carefully and fully organized, as for any other type of business. To sell through an agent or through shops it is necessary to be able to promise supply in quantity of a standardized article. Baby blankets, for instance, sell well and are easy to make. But no shop or agent could sell at a profit three or four baby blankets, all of different kinds at different prices. It would be necessary — in planning to make a business of baby blankets — to experiment with various sizes, materials and patterns, till a baby blanket is developed that is attractive enough to find ready sale, that can be made rapidly, standardized as to size, material and selling price, though differing as much as possible in the manner of the weaving in order to give the "uniqueness" (if I may be permitted to coin a word) that appeals to many people. It is necessary to be able to assure a large enough supply of the article to interest an agent, — who, as a rule, talks by the gross, not by the dozen. For this it may be necessary to enlist other weavers, as one weaver working on

one loom cannot produce a commercial quantity. The buying of the material must be gone into very carefully to insure getting the desired yarns at the lowest possible price. It is true that weaving the same thing day after day and week after week and year after year is not as interesting as weaving a variety of articles, but this is business, this is a job, not a handicraft pursued for pleasure.

The line to select depends a great deal on the sales-possibilities in the field and also on the capacity of the weaver. Hand-woven neckties are being made and sold at a profit in some places; hand-woven tweeds and dress fabrics are a profitable line almost anywhere, linens also sell well — especially when some special style of, say, towels or table pieces is developed.

The line that probably is least likely to show a profit is the weaving of bags, but for some reason many weavers select bags as a line. It is true that some have succeeded in this line, but it is particularly difficult.

Coverlets of the Colonial type are being made in quantity in the South, by weavers who are content with a very small return for their labor, so this line is not advised.

In my opinion, the best opportunity for real profit is in the making of high grade drapery and upholstery fabrics. But this requires a high degree of skill in the weaver, and suitable sales outlets through decorating firms and manufacturers of high grade furniture. It is not a line for a beginner.

A weaver is rarely a good salesman, so that it is advisable to sell through agents or shops unless one has a promising local field — such as a tourist trade. But selling "on consignment" is not advisable. This method of merchandising rarely returns a profit either to the weaver or the agent.

Yes, it is possible to make a profitable business of hand weaving. Many people are doing it. But only by working out the problems of supply, production and sales in a business-like way.

Suppose you wished to make your cook-stove return a profit: you would not bake a few pies today, a cake tomorrow, a batch of cookies the next, or perhaps roast a chicken, and expect people to come with money in their hands to give you a profit. Make some one thing that people will want so much that they are willing to part with their money to obtain; make plenty of it; arrange to sell it in a business-like way. That seems to be the secret of success in such a project.

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