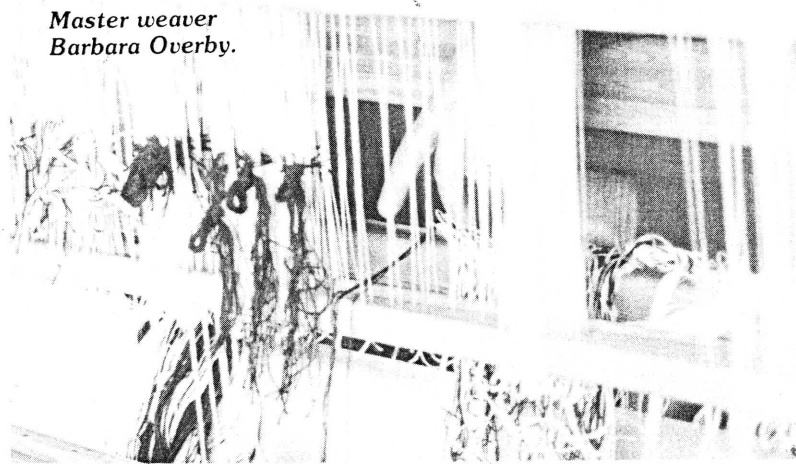


Textiles

Dyeing, spinning, weaving & quilting



*Master weaver
Barbara Overby.*

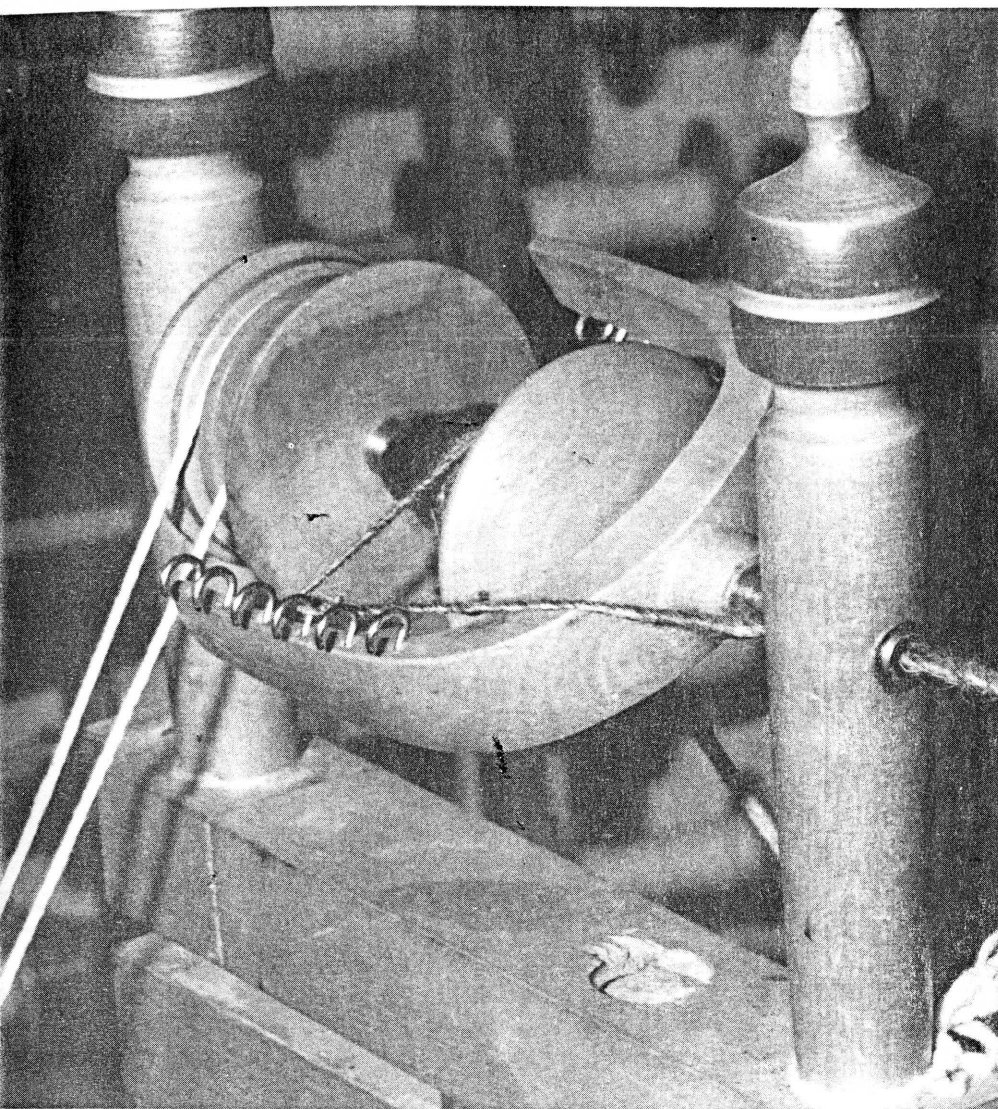


*Patchwork quilt by
Malvema Richardson.*

Photos by Margot Ford McMillen.

THE **MASTERS**
& their traditional arts

Missouri

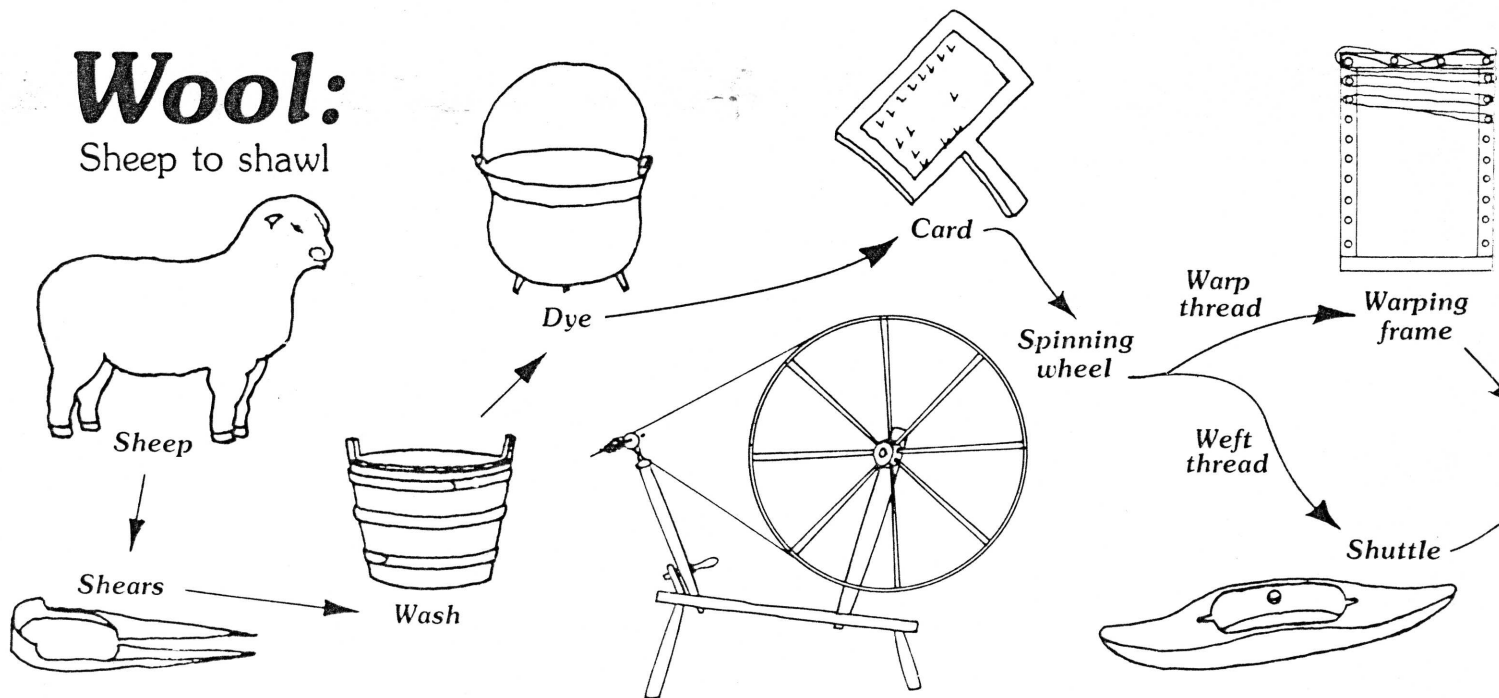


Warping a loom, inset, is a tedious job.

The spinning wheel twists wool fibers into yarn.

Wool:

Sheep to shawl



Spinning and Handweaving

Weaving technique involves interlacing strips of material under and over other strips of material to create a larger flat piece. Many craftsmen weave. Chair seats, for example, are often woven by the chairmaker. Dr. Laurel Wilson of the University of Missouri-Columbia describes traditional techniques of spinning yarn and weaving cloth.

By Laurel Wilson

Archaeologists have found prehistoric evidence of weaving. The first woven goods were hard textiles like baskets and mats woven from grasses. Strips of animal hides were probably used next. Later it was discovered that short fibers such as wool, flax and cotton could be twisted together or spun to form a strong, pliable yarn which then could be woven into cloth. People gathered animal hairs and wools from thorns where they were caught. Hairs were also removed from animals which had been killed. Much later, when metals such as iron were made into tools, sheep were shorn for their wool.

Tools for Spinning and Weaving

Early spinning equipment consisted of a simple tool, the spindle. The spindle was a stick with a weight made of clay or wood attached to it. After a mass of fiber like wool or cotton was cleaned and combed to pull all the pieces in one direction, the spinner attached a bit to the end of the spindle. She twirled the spindle, drawing out the fiber as it twisted together to form

yarn. The weight kept the spindle in balance and added momentum. In 1530 the spinning wheel was invented, making the job of spinning fibers much easier.

Looms hold a set of yarns tight while another yarn is laced over and under. The first looms were simple horizontal bars to which yarns, or warp, were tied. The warp was held tight by weights made of stones or clay. Another yarn, or weft is laced over and under the warp, then beaten firmly in place. This loom was hard to use because the filling or weft yarn had to be beaten upwards, a physical movement which is contrary to human physiology. Other more comfortable looms were developed, many of which are still in use today. On modern looms the weft is beaten horizontally or down into the warp rather than up.

Textiles in America

Handweaving was not the preferred method of obtaining cloth in colonial America. Industrially-produced fabrics and imports from India and the Far East were available and were shipped to the Colonies. Textiles were important trade goods for several reasons: They were light in weight and could be used for packing other more fragile goods; they were not breakable; they were valuable. Textile factories were labor-intensive industries which employed many workers. Since one of the reasons England wanted colonies was to have a new market for goods, colonists were not encouraged to produce textiles for their own use. Growing and processing fibers and spinning and weaving the yarns took time away from food production and production of income-yielding commodities such as tobacco.

In spite of the many reasons for not producing hand-made textiles, Americans continued to spin and weave. Home textile production flourished in the regions of the United States which were isolated from factory-made textiles because of a poor transportation system. Research has shown that about one-third of the families owned looms. A weaving house was often part of the family dwelling.

Both clothing and household textiles were often made of home-grown and handspun yarns of wool, linen and cotton. These fibers, which are pale in their natural states, can be dyed with home-grown dyes. Some of the dyes included those from trees such as walnut hulls, butternut, and osage orange. Flowers made a number of dye colors such as yellows from marigolds, purples from camellia and greens from the blackeyed susan. Madder, a root, was a source of red dye and was often included in dye gardens. Indigo, a source of blue dye, was grown in some areas of the southeast United States

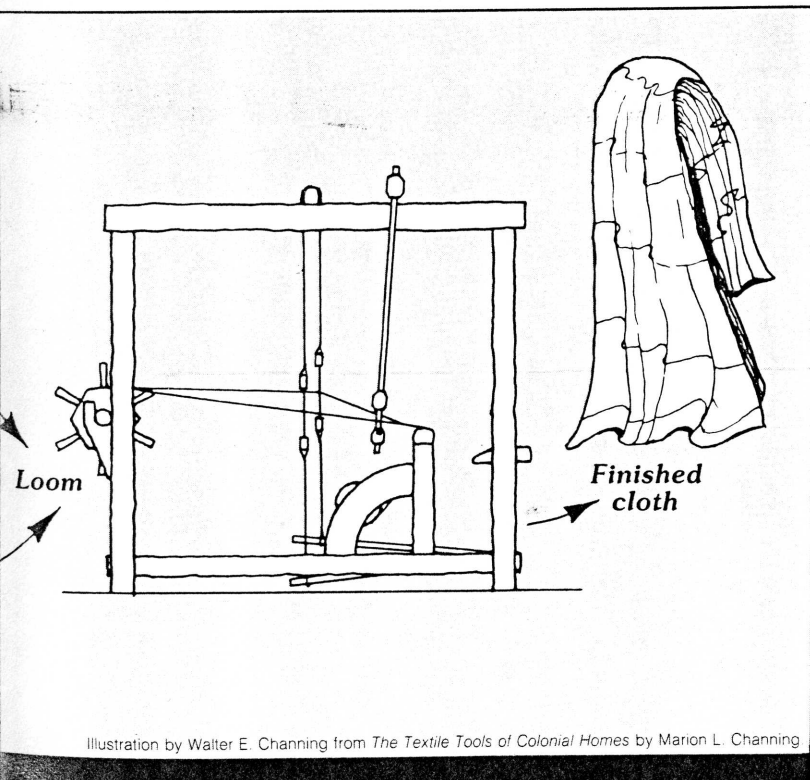


Illustration by Walter E. Channing from *The Textile Tools of Colonial Homes* by Marion L. Channing



Margot Ford McMillen photo

Apprentice Janet Britt and master Barbara Overby warp a counterbalance loom.

and could be bought at the general store in other areas. Dye can be applied before or after the fiber is spun into yarn, or after it is woven, but is usually applied to the yarn. Plaids and stripes can be created from different colored yarns.

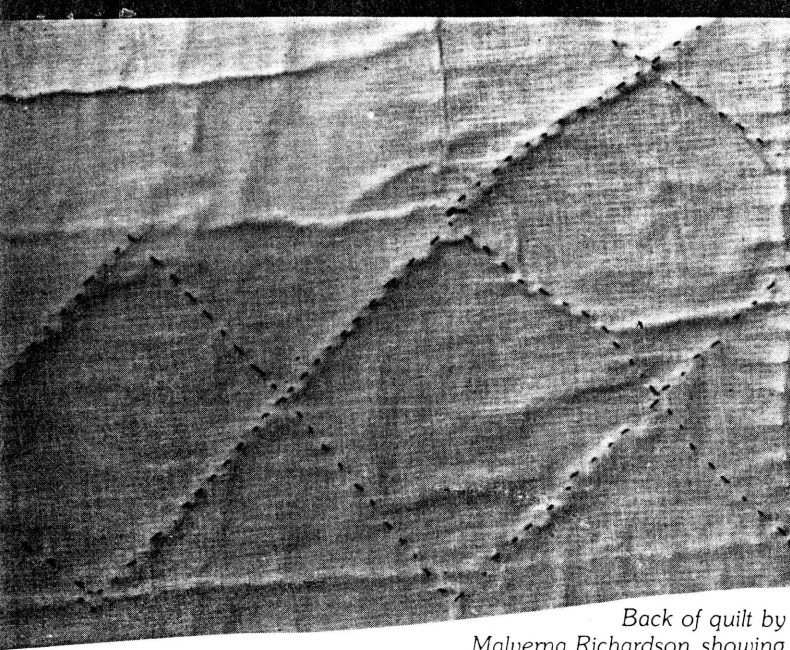
Most people think that women were the spinners and weavers. However, most of the professional weavers were men. They produced fancy textiles such as the patterned coverlets that often have the date and place of origin woven into the corner. They also produced carpets. Women wove for their families, but women who did professional weaving for outsiders were in the minority. Sometimes a woman travelled within her neighborhood and produced fabrics for her neighbors from their yarns on their looms. Other women used their own looms but wove other people's yarns.

The Art of Weaving

The most common type of handweaving in early America was done on a barn loom or four-post counterbalance loom. To use this simple loom, the weaver first must thread the warp yarn through heddles or eyes. Warping the loom is an

eye-straining, back-breaking process. Each inch of warp takes from 24 to 40 threads. The heddles are held by harnesses or frames. The loom usually had two to four harnesses, attached or counterbalanced to each other by a rope wound over a high beam. The weaver operated hand or foot-driven treadles that pulled some harnesses down and raised others so the weft yarn could be passed through.

Many weave patterns could be produced on the common counterbalance loom and weaves were often chosen for specific purposes. They were often named for special events or people in a region's history. In 1985, master weaver Barbara Spande Overby and her two apprentices, Corinne Detherow and Janet Britt, wove patterns from a handwritten book owned by the Missouri Historical Society of St. Louis. *A Draft Book For The Industrious* was compiled by James Monroe Woods in 1844 and contained 15 patterns for weaving coverlets and household linens. Among the coverlet patterns were "Jefferson's Delight," named for Thomas Jefferson, and "Missouri." Marguerite Davison, an early textile researcher, showed more than 100 variations in her book *A Handweaver's Source Book*.



Back of quilt by
Malverna Richardson showing
stitches that join quilt top to solid backing.



Quilting

A patchwork of the past

By Margot Ford McMillen

When cloth is made into clothing, large pieces of fabric are cut to shapes that match the human body. The pieces are sewn together. Usually, the cutting leaves lots of scraps too small for clothing. The traditional quilter always gathers these scraps up to sew together and create large, warm quilts. Some quilters save cloth from outgrown clothes, and often the quilt scrap basket contains fabrics from other sources as well.

Master quilter Malverna Richardson remembers, "After everyone went to bed and it was quiet, my mother would wash fertilizer sacks and dye them with berries to get different colors and then quilt them."

Making a Quilt

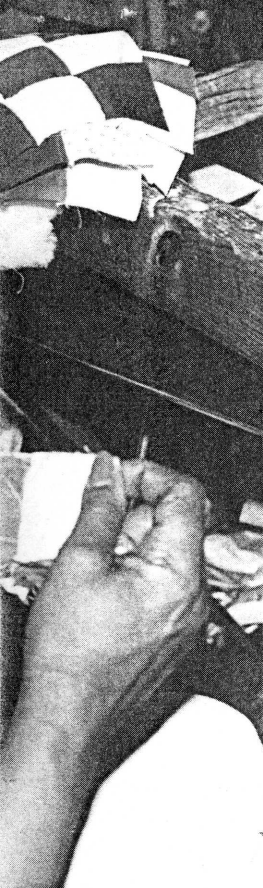
First, the quilt pieces are sewn or pieced together to make a quilt top from the small pieces. Quilt tops can be as small as a doll bed, as large as a double bed, or larger. Most quilt tops are carefully planned. The quilter cuts the pieces according to patterns. If the quilter has enough scraps or wants to buy fabric for a top, she chooses colors and designs she likes together. The colors might have a special meaning, as the red, white and green of master quilter Malverna Richardson's Christmas quilt. Mrs. Richardson's apprentice, Doris Graham, created her first quilt from the colors of her college sorority and the sororities of her friends.

Further Readings

(More bibliographic suggestions are available from the Missouri Cultural Heritage Center, Conley House, Sanford and Conley, University of Missouri-Columbia, Columbia, MO 65211.)

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Malvema Richardson, at left, pieces squares of fabric together. Below, she sews quilt top, padding and backing together on a quilt frame.



Photos by Margot Ford McMillen.

The second step is sewing the finished quilt top to a fabric backing, usually a sheet. In most cases a layer of padding is placed between the quilt top and backing to provide insulation for extra warmth. One edge of this construction—quilt top, padding and backing—is fastened to a long board and rolled up. The other edge is fastened to another board. The boards are placed on sawhorses and held with nails or clamps. This quilting frame holds the fabrics tight so the quilter can sit in a chair and stitch, or quilt, the three layers together. As each section of quilting is completed, the boards are rolled to bring another stretch of fabric to the quilter. Sometimes the quilting stitches will make a design like a heart, butterfly or tulip in blank pieces of the quilt top.

When quilting was a common skill among homemakers, quilting parties were popular among neighbors. A group of women, young and old, would gather with their children and stitch quilts all day. In this way, the tradition was passed on from one generation to the next. Marriages were honored by gifts of quilts in the double wedding ring pattern. Anniversaries were commemorated with quilts made of blocks by family and friends. There were other patterns for other special occasions.

Quilts were important before warm blankets became easy to buy, and quilts have always been loved for their beauty. Quilting is a traditional art that combines practicality with beauty, and that has been passed for generations from mother to young daughter. Malvema Richardson says, "I know I was doing it at the age of 5 or 6. I learned from my mother who learned from her mother who learned from her mother. I learned basic patterns from her."

THE MASTERS & their traditional arts.

"The Masters and Their Traditional Arts" is a series of brochures written by experts in Missouri traditional arts. The series is edited by Margot Ford McMillen and brochures are designed by Spencer Galloway for the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program.

THE PROJECT

In 1984, the National Endowment for the Arts offered funds to states that wished to honor traditional artists and encourage them to pass on their skills. These artists, who learned their skills in their communities through apprenticeship and imitation of respected models and not through academic studies, have often been neglected. Many authentic traditional arts that once flourished in Missouri communities, such as Irish step-dancing and bootmaking, have begun to disappear and are worthy of recognition and conservation.

The Missouri Arts Council and Missouri Cultural Heritage Center at the University of Missouri-Columbia developed our state's program to honor traditional artists. We call this innovative program the *Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program*.

To begin, we used research to learn what kinds of communities exist in the state. Who were Missouri's first settlers? What groups came later? We tried to find artists who still had the important skills and encouraged them to work with a new generation.

A state-wide panel of experts in traditional music, art and cultural heritage selected participants from the many applications. The experts asked such questions as: Is the artist part of a community where the art is an important part of life? Is the art in danger of dying out? Is the artist a true master in his or her field? Does the artist's work show excellence?

The *Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program* is now three years old. A traveling exhibition, produced by the Missouri State Museum, Department of Natural Resources, features the work of the participating artists and suggests how their art fits into the community. The exhibition, "The Masters", is a landmark exhibition, the first to honor traditional artists from across Missouri who have been selected both for excellence and authenticity by a state-wide panel of experts. (by Margot Ford McMillen, program coordinator)

