

The new weave

The rising demand for hand-crafted textiles is inspiring British weavers to reinvent the ancient craft. **Ros Weaver** meets three designers threading Victorian artistry into 21st-century fabrics. Photographs **Richard Okon**

You could be forgiven for thinking that there's nothing that hasn't already been done with the ancient art of weaving. But a new generation of craftspeople are unpicking and reshaping what textiles are and can be. Interesting advances, yet to trickle down to everyday accessories, include the development of electrospun nanofibres which can form skin-like material, and 'intelligent textiles' that will magically transform into TV screens. Metals, plastics and new-generation synthetic fibres are finding their way into the weave, as well as natural fibres like hemp, nettle and bamboo.

New technology is now opening up previously undreamt-of possibilities that Clare Johnston, head of the Royal College of Art's research-oriented textile department, is keen to explore. 'Textiles are so interesting now because scientific development has happened at great speed, but not always with an aesthetic aim,' she says. 'Scientists speak one language and designers speak another. I'm trying to bring the two together.'

The current desire for hand-crafted homewares means there's a growing market for textiles that can't be made cheaply in China. 'There's no textile industry to go into when they leave college, so there's been a rise in the number of designer-makers exploring what they can do with materials and techniques,' says Philippa Watkins, senior tutor at the RCA. Some, such as Wallace Sewell, with their colour-rich designs for throws and cushions, help to keep the industry alive by working with small, struggling mills to develop unusual weaving techniques.

Paul Smith is doing his bit, too, by revisiting designs from Gainsborough Silk's historic archives and introducing his characteristic stripes to create a collection of

gorgeous upholstery fabrics. The weaving of one-off pieces for upholstery, blinds, throws and wall-hangings is reviving the cottage industry weaving used to be centuries ago.

Weaving has always been considered to be the work of women. In Ancient Greece, it was common knowledge that the goddess Athena had invented the loom. Piqued because the mortal Arachne became a better weaver than she was, Athena turned her into a spider. Even at the Bauhaus, with all its revolutionary ideas, women were confined to the weaving workshops. In 1801, Joseph Jacquard had put control of the woven world firmly in the hands of men with his invention of a system of punched cards to allow the automatic weaving of intricate patterns. And Jacquard's invention is still going strong. There are a handful of mills, such as Garin in Valencia, where silk weavers still sit at pedal-operated Jacquard looms dating back to the 1840s. But most are powered electrically. Design possibilities have been opened up by computer programming, which can convert hand-drawn or photographic images into punch-card information.

In a society in which we see textiles as something in which to dress people and things, the solitary weaver finds herself caught in the no-man's-land between art and craft. Perhaps it's time to hang something woven, rather than painted, on the wall.

Eleanor Pritchard

Works with wools inspired by landscape colours
Eleanor weaves hangings, upholstery fabrics and haute couture fabrics on a dobbie loom – a huge wooden contraption that looks as though it predates the industrial revolution. It is Eleanor's pride and joy: 'It's such straightforward technology, you can fix it if



Looming large (left): Eleanor Pritchard with the dobbie, on which she weaves double cloth – a style used to blend different patterns. Below: swatches from her winter collection, 2007-08

something goes wrong.' She has become an expert at weaving double cloth – two layers, with threads brought through in various patterns to the opposite side and linking the two – a technique also used for her range of cosy blankets in muted tones woven at a traditional mill in Carmarthenshire.

Wool in quintessentially English earthy hues dominates her work, with ordered splashes of rich colour. It's hardly surprising that she was commissioned to weave panels for the National Trust headquarters in Swindon, huge, double-sided panels that can be raised and lowered to section off the space.

Sometimes she weaves strips of ribbon into the wool. The commission she's working on now is for a pair of long narrow panels using a variety of textured wool yarns, dark Lurex and shiny rayon inspired by 'chalk and flint landscapes with cloud, fallow and worked land'.

Eleanor worked as a picture researcher – hence the 'storyboards' of inspiring images on the walls of her Greenwich studio – before an evening course at London's City Lit awakened her passion for weaving. 'I would never have worked so hard if I'd stumbled into it earlier,' she says.

www.eleanorpritchard.com



Ismini Samanidou

Creates computer-aided hangings and upholstery
Using computer programming to translate and transform photographic images of leaves or peeling walls, Ismini creates wall hangings and upholstery in combinations of yarns, stopping and starting the Jacquard loom to introduce new materials and themes. A large wall panel by Ismini hangs in the offices of law firm Allen & Overy, in their new Norman Foster building at Spitalfields – a part of London steeped in the textile industry. Her latest commission has been to create translucent window blinds with leafy woven ▶

◀ images taken from her client's garden.

A keen mathematician, Ismini came to Britain to pursue an interest in photography. 'When I did my BA at Central Saint Martins, I discovered that weaving was something that could combine maths and photography. The threads need to add up.' She went on to study textiles at the RCA. 'With the Jacquard loom I realised I could use computer programming to translate my photos directly into fabrics, bringing the two things almost instantly together. I never looked back.'

www.isminisamanidou.com



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Thread carefully (above): Ismini Samanidou and her Cuadra Chair, made with John Miller. Left: Helen Giles with her wire-mesh wall hanging

Helen Giles

Weaves wire sculptures and wall hangings

Helen Giles's inspiration is the urban landscape of Brixton, where she lives. 'I love the chaotic layering of grids, meshes and their shadows. I try to capture the chaos within the ordered grids in my weaving.' Helen weaves sculptural wall hangings and room dividers with metal wire as a prime ingredient. She is exploring electro-forming and electro-plating techniques to apply different colours to the stainless steel or copper wire she uses in atmospheric wall hangings which cast complex shadows.

Also emerging from the RCA's prestigious textiles MA course, Helen is working on a wall hanging for the Worshipful Company of Weavers to replace one commissioned from Ismini Samanidou. These commissions will join a collection of contemporary textiles at the Victoria & Albert museum.

Helen's interest in metals comes from a class in ceramics: 'We used metal oxides to colour clay. I started to create colour effects using metals with wool and linen.' ★

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You can find a weaver to commission on the Crafts Council's database, at www.photostore.org.uk