

Tapestry Techniques from Archie and Susan

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Meeting the teaching team of Archie Brennan and Susan Martin Maffei in 2006 and attending three of their workshops in Oregon were life-changing experiences for me. I learned so many tapestry techniques, jumping my weaving skills by orders of magnitude. I also learned a lot more about teaching a group of tapestry students. Archie and Susan were smart, funny, talented, generous teachers, and I love to share what I learned from them.

Here are three design principles:

1. **Draw every day.** The more you draw, the better you get. You pass the intimidating phase of staring at a blank sheet of paper. You learn to draw what you can weave. Each line has a purpose.
2. **Simplify and Clarify.** This was most clearly shown when comparing the elaborately detailed tapestries of old to the clear, concise designs Archie drew and wove. Also look at the faces on Susan's small tapestries...a few warps wide, but so much information.
3. **Negative Space is Important.** Because this is tapestry, not painting, you need to consider the negative space to be just as important as the foreground. They need to be woven together; you cannot just fill in the background later!

The tapestry techniques they shared cannot always be described in a few words or ranked in order of importance. Here are a few, but not all, of the ones I use daily.

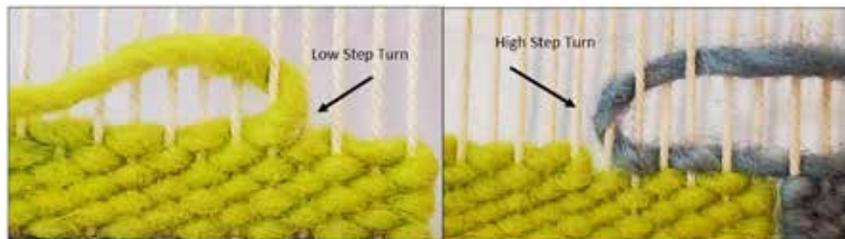
1. **Meet and Separate.** "Every two adjacent wefts travel in opposite directions in any one shed." If you add a color between two shapes, you need to either add two wefts or change the direction of all the wefts to the left or right of the new one to continue to follow the rule above. We learned how to stop a color on one side of its shape and restart it on the other to change its direction.

2. **You Can't Build a Brick Wall Over Thin Air.** You can't weave over empty warps. Well, as we know, you can weave over empty warps, but in general, there is a reason we weave the decreasing shapes first, so we do not have to needle weave underneath a woven area. If we leave empty warps on purpose (something I personally did not see Archie do) then there should be a support mechanism, e.g. double half hitches, to keep the weft in place.
3. **Double Half Hitches to Secure the Weft.** Use a strand of sewing thread about 4 times the width of the tapestry and a similar color to the weft. Tie onto the first warp with a square knot, leaving a 2-inch long tail of thread. Move the thread behind the next warp to keep the thread on the back of your tapestry, then tie a double half hitch around that warp. It needs to be tight enough to not slip later. Move the thread behind the next warp, tie a double half hitch around that warp. Do this for each individual warp. Leave a tail at the end. Make the double half hitches at the bottom and at the top of the tapestry. After the tapestry is removed from the loom, use a tapestry needle to insert the thread tails back into the warp channel.
4. **How to Weave a Straight Horizontal Line.** A full pass, one time back and forth, will get you a thin line that is a bit wavy. If you need it to look smooth and flat, you can weave a half thickness of Color A and then lay a half thickness of Color B on top of it in the same shed.
5. **Securing the Warp Ends.** To secure the warp ends on the back, use a length of thread 4 times the width of the tapestry. Start by grouping the first 3 warps together, sewing only through the back layer of weft, for almost an inch. Then encircle each individual warp with the thread using an over two/back one stitch. The thread travels between two warps clear through to

the front of the tapestry, back across one warp, nestling down in between two passes of weft, goes through to the back, travels forward over two warps. Repeat across the width of the tapestry. Because the thread goes directly across one warp, parallel to the weft but between two passes, the thread sinks down into the fabric and is unseen. The last three warps are grouped together like the first three. Afterward, you pull each warp enough to keep it from showing on the front. Easier done than explained!

6. **Low Step and High Step.** If I had to choose just one thing, and I am glad I do not have to do that, it would be the importance of low step and high step. Using these appropriately allows for smooth curves and even diagonals, fine-tuning the shape to the design. Every turn of build-up in a shape is either a high or a low step.

a. **Low Step.** Look across the tapestry where you are going to weave. Every other warp is not covered by the weft of the previous pass. Turning on those uncovered warps creates a low step turn.



Low and High Step Turns, photo: Terry Olson.

b. **High Step.** A high step turn is made when the weft turns on a warp that was covered in the previous weft pass.

c. **The difference is in height.** The low step turns create a shorter vertical build up than the high step turns. It is approximately true that four low step turns builds up to the same height as three high step turns.

d. **Why it Matters.** Paying attention to low and high steps and to the number of turns on each warp, letting them work together, allows you to build shapes and lines accurately and smoothly.



Finishing Warp Ends: Pulled Tight, Not yet Pulled, and Finished Edge, photo: Terry Olson.



Archie Brennan Sorting Slides at Workshop, 2007, photo: Terry Olson.