

# Introduction

*The Book of Looms* had its origin in simple curiosity. In assembling various looms for my wife I found myself wondering about the lineage of what appeared to be a most simple yet elegant tool. I consulted the few weaving books she had acquired, but in them, as in most others I later investigated, the loom was treated only incidentally—usually in a “how-to-weave” context, rarely historically. I learned that, in general, writers on weaving concerned themselves primarily with textiles, drafts, yarns, colors, and patterns and discussed looms only as much as was necessary to describe how to tie on a particular pattern. Any discussion of looms themselves was relegated to the murky journals of archaeologists and anthropologists who viewed the loom as evidence of a certain state of cultural development or pattern of migration in ancient or primitive societies. The archaeological material is highly specialized and fragmented, and only a few have tried to piece it together and even then only for a limited geographic area.

M. D. C. Crawford noted that weaving is “the most ancient of the great arts,” appearing at the dawn of history, virtually inseparable from true culture. Crawford wrote, “From the rough fish weirs to the most elaborate baskets, from the coarser fabrics of flax to the gossamer webs of cotton and silk, it has sustained and beautified (man’s) life from the night of history to the latest passing hour; it is the veritable nurse of civilization.” Crawford was not wrong. The principles, the tools, even the language of weaving have acquired by their fundamental

importance symbolic and metaphoric value in our lives. It is said that in China the warp, firmly fastened to the loom, symbolizes the immutable forces of the world, while the weft, shifting back and forth, symbolizes the transient affairs of man. In India the warp represents eternal existence, and the weft symbolizes the stages of an individual’s life. Our word “heirloom” originated with the family loom that was passed down from generation to generation, the word “spinster” derived from the custom that unmarried women spun a certain quantity of yarn before they were married for making the household linens. The customs, practices, and language surrounding the loom and its products over the centuries have thoroughly woven themselves into the very warp and woof of our culture.

Our word “loom” derives from the Old English *geloma*, which meant simply “tool” or “utensil.” The loom, perhaps next to the stone ax and spear, was *the* tool in ancient times. Its history has been largely neglected in favor of the textiles woven on it—partly because textiles have survived in greater quantities than looms and partly because the use of a tool can tell us more about a culture than can the tool itself. Nonetheless, the loom has an impressive history that must have been preceded by a prehistory of even greater duration than the period since the earliest textile discoveries.

*The Book of Looms* carries the story of the handloom up to the present, but I have omitted detailed discussion of developments during the Industrial Revolution. This

period during the mid- to late-nineteenth century introduced a number of mechanical “improvements” that took the loom out of the hands of the handweaver and put it in a factory where a relatively unskilled technician could monitor the production of cloth. While I have noted the major advances in loom technology during the industrial age, mechanical looms do not figure in my discussion of the handloom except insofar as they affected the progress of handweaving. Unlike the neglected handloom, mechanical looms have been amply described elsewhere.

The history of the evolution of the loom is a history of minor innovations, mostly designed to increase the speed of fabric production. The entire weaving process can be simplified into three basic operations: holding the warp under tension, opening and changing the shed, and inserting and beating up the weft. All the improvements and changes in loom design and construction are concerned with one or more of these problems. Once weaving entered the commercial arena, doing it better usually meant doing it faster. Today, pattern cards for jacquard weaving can be cut by computer and woven at the rate of 200 picks per minute. On other modern looms water jets can propel weft yarn through a shed at the rate of *1,000 picks per minute!* The handloom, which began as a mechanism to furnish necessities, has survived, at least in western societies, as a specialized tool of the handcraftsman who furnishes art or luxury fabrics.

This history makes no pretense at being exhaustive. Not every loom or loom type from every area has been

discussed. In the interest of clarity, I have concentrated on the major types of looms and influences on loom development in areas of the world that offer sufficient evidence to link segments of the loom’s fragmentary history together. I have arbitrarily omitted carpet and rug looms from the discussion because of their specialized techniques of knotting, even though their loom frames closely resemble those used for cloth weaving. I have tried to contain my discussion as much as possible to looms, referring to textiles, spinning, costume design, color, and so on only as far as was needed to illuminate loom design and construction. There are obvious dangers in this approach, and some readers may object to certain generalizations that result from narrowing my focus to the tool itself. I expect that the reader will want to know more about textile history, trade routes, and costumes of various eras, but this information is available elsewhere and would only smother the story of the loom itself if presented here.

It pays to remember that it is the historian, not history itself, that organizes the past for the benefit of the present reader. The history of the handloom is nowhere as neat and sequential as I have presented it here. Many elements of its history are as yet unknown, and many of the distinctions I make may collapse before the study of future or more experienced historians. I regard *The Book of Looms* as an initial endeavor—a book that is comprehensive enough for the lay reader, specialized enough for the archaeologist or textile historian, and I would hope, accurate and readable enough for both.