Encouraging curiosity, exploration, innovation in weaving

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Making a New Design

Muffy Young

I am a production weaver who weaves silk scarves and shawls that I sell at craft fairs, to galleries, and through various wearable art and seasonal shows. I want my customers to stay engaged with my work, so I introduce a new design about once a year. I don’t have an over-abundance of time to do sampling, so my new designs often evolve with small changes to either current or previous work.

As I was looking for inspiration in the book To Weave for the Sun: Ancient Andean Textiles, by Rebecca Stone-Miller,1 the picture that really grabbed me was on the cover. This stunning image (Figure 1) is a grid of floating diamonds separated by rectangles. There is an overall simplicity to the large graphic, but there is also a wealth of detail in that each rectangle has a different image inside it. The technique is interlock tapestry, which would not make an affordable scarf, but I knew I could make a large graphic with color-and-weave effects. Color-and-weave effect patterns make a big statement because they have a pattern that is, by definition, larger than the weave structure. You can see it from a distance, and up close there’s a new level of detail to observe and study. You can almost make a picture, like an ancient weaver’s tapestry. Loom control can imitate handwork.

I designed the threading first, starting with my grid and the question: how many warp ends? My pricing was based on warps of 288 ends of silk, cultivated and noil, size 20/2. This gives all my scarves approximately the same weight, about 130 grams, resulting in the same cost of yarn no matter what pattern. I usually set the silk at between 24 and 28 ends per inch, but I wanted to use some eight-shaft satin weave in the area between the diamonds so I chose 30 ends per inch, giving me 9.6 inches in the reed. This is pretty narrow, so to keep the diamonds from being too big I chose to make my patterns with four ends black, four ends color. Since I had been planning to weave my continuing line of blocks scarves with four and four in the color-and-weave sections this year, this gave continuity to the look of the whole Muffy Young Handweaving collection. To make a diamond I would thread two diagonally connected blocks, first on shafts 1-4, then on shafts 5-8, repeat, then reverse on each side of a black center: 64 ends for each diamond. Leaving space for a connecting pattern I could fit two diamonds across my warp.
Next in the threading, what should go between the diamonds? In the Andean textile, the diamonds and rectangles are offset from each other in alternating rows. I could not do this with the chosen structures and the number of shafts my loom provided and my legs could lift, so I simplified the grid to one with the diamonds formed in columns. This meant the threading could be a straight draw, the simplest way to make satin. I had 288 − (64 × 2) = 160 warp ends that I divided into three groups, between and outside the diamonds. I tweaked the proportions until it looked right to me.

Working out the treadling was a slower process. I had to give up my idea of big graphics between the diamonds because everything I tried was too complicated, and too hard to read as a coherent design. I have several PCW files to prove how difficult this was. I tried different ways to treadle the diamonds and various arrangements of satins with different patterns between them. I discovered that there were several ways I could mimic the deflected double weave style of the diamonds in the satin threading, so I put variations on houndstooth stars and other color-and-weave patterns in the rectangular sections between the diamonds. I was aiming for good contrast between the diamonds and rectangles, but was not there yet. Figure 2 shows a particularly chaotic version. I was seduced by too many possibilities and had to simplify before my design lost its connection with the ancient Andean weaving.

I had to get back to the simpler grid of diamonds, so I eliminated the extra patterns, leaving only one satin-weave pattern between each diamond in the grid. My background became more stripy than I had originally planned, but it helped with the simplicity I wanted. I tweaked each intersection between the patterns to make sure they merged or separated the way I wanted. I made sure the front and back of the finished piece would look reasonably similar. Once I decided on a draft and took it to the loom I still had to make changes. In the end, I eliminated most of the satin sections. I loved the sheen, so I left some in, but the structure was too loose for a whole scarf. I was finally satisfied with what I had created: Figure 3 shows the draft and Figure 4 the scarves. In honor of the inspiration, I named it Andes Sun. I wove the first warp in black and soft colors and then tried black and white.

Figure 3. Andes Sun scarf draft

Figure 4. Andes Sun scarves, in color and black and white

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Meanwhile, my sales rep took an order for shawls in the same pattern. Expanding the design to the larger format of a shawl was really fun. I essentially did nothing to the treadling draft except enlarge some of the rectangles. In the threading, I had room for four diamonds on the wider warp. I contemplated reversing one or two to make an “X” shape, but decided against it because it would take me too far from my original inspiration. Instead, for variation, I started and ended two of the four diamonds on the shaft 5-8 block (Figure 5). The satin weave sections stand out more in the shawls, with a gorgeous, shiny surface over a wider span (Figure 6).

The cloth I used for inspiration in this design was a mantle or shroud made in the Early Colonial period of the South American Andes Mountains. The iconography indicates high status, the floating diamonds reflect some Colonial influence, and the colors may hold coded messages. I felt gratitude and connection with the weavers of the Andes, as they challenged me to create a new design.

End Note

Figure 5. Andes Sun Shawl draft

Figure 6. Andes Sun shawls, in color and black and white