

The Care of Personal Tapestries and Textile Works

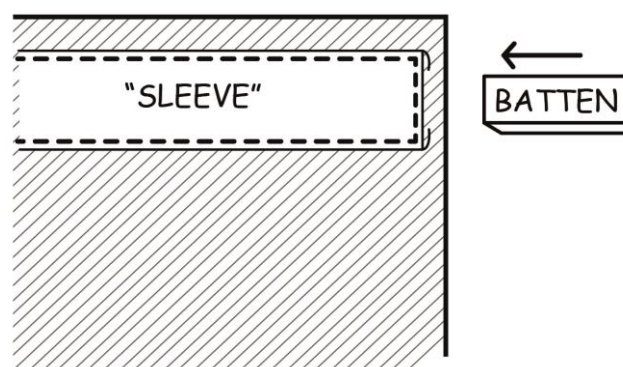
Caroline Booth

The creation of a personal tapestry takes considerable time: from the initial ideas, sketches, sampling and decisions made on the combination and range of yarns for the weft, to the warping up of the loom or frame. Many hours, weeks or months can be consumed by the weaving of the piece, so it is only right that the finished tapestry should be given attention in mounting and display, followed by good aftercare.

Having spent the past four decades as a freelance Textile Conservator, I have been asked to contribute a short piece on this topic based on my years of experience within the museums and galleries sector, as well as working with private collectors of textiles. I am aware that this subject has been previously addressed by Joanne Soroka and Kirsten Glasbrook in their excellent books on tapestry weaving, but I hope that I have something to add.

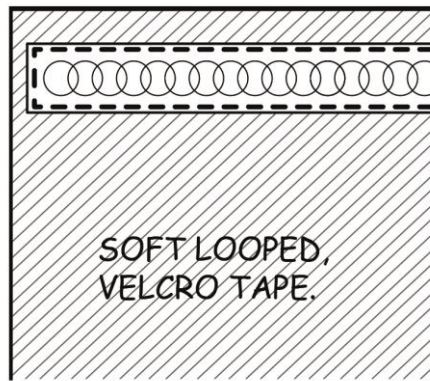
Mounting: the way in which you would like your tapestry to be displayed should be taken into consideration at the design stage before weaving commences – whether, if large, you wish it to be hung freely against a wall, or if small, placed into a conventional picture/box frame. These decisions will determine the first and last few centimetres of weaving: utilizing a section of plain weave to create turned-back hems, or leaving exposed warps to emphasize the structure of the piece or to form visible knotted ends. Once your completed tapestry has been cut off the loom or frame, and the warp ends have been secured, the weft ends can be neatened; then the piece can be lightly pressed, only if necessary, using a cool iron and a dampened muslin cloth to correct the shape and any distortion in the weave. However, if you have used a variety of yarns and fibres in the weft please do this with care, as different fibres react to heat and moisture in very different ways.

Display: if the tapestry is large (1 metre + in any dimension), the best method is to suspend it across its width from a horizontal wooden batten or pole which will be inserted



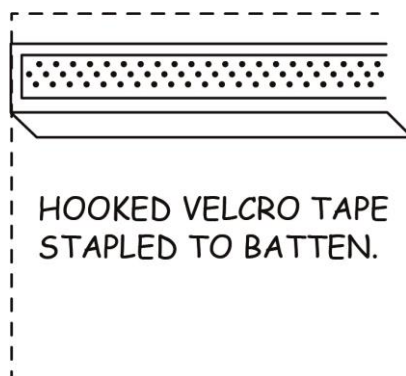
through a fabric 'sleeve' or channel stitched to the reverse of the top edge.

Use a strong, plain-weave cotton such as washed calico or curtain lining about 12cms deep to allow for 1cm turnings along each edge and slightly shorter than the width of the tapestry when hemmed at each end. Choose a strong cotton or polyester thread of a suitable colour and stitch over two warps at the front with a 1cm running stitch at the back across the width of the sleeve, finishing securely at either end.



SOFT LOOPED,
VELCRO TAPE.

Alternatively Velcro or hook and loop tape can be used, especially if your tapestry is to be displayed in a public space with a need to remove it easily for cleaning, or in the case of an emergency; this method also allows for the 'fine tuning' and minor adjustments to the hang of the textile. The soft half (loop) of the Velcro tape is stitched to the reverse of the tapestry across the top edge, as above, while the hooked section is fixed to the wooden batten using a staple gun, preferably using stainless steel staples which will not rust or corrode over time.

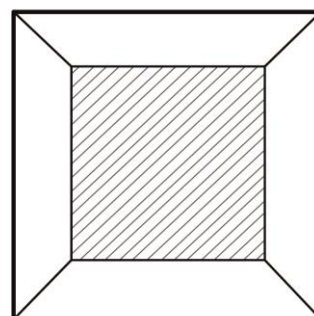


HOOKED VELCRO TAPE
STAPLED TO BATTEN.

A smaller tapestry can be displayed using the above techniques, or placed in a suitable picture frame, with or without glass. It is important that any mount card or backing board should be rigid and acid-free to preserve your weaving and prevent discolouration over time: select a suitable picture/box frame and cover the backing board with a dye-fast, plain-weave fabric, stretched evenly and glued at the back only – cotton, linen, velvet etc.



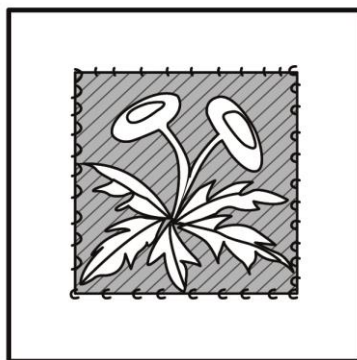
CROSS SECTION
OF BOX FRAME.



BACKING FABRIC
GLUED TO BACK OF
MOUNT BOARD.

Stitch your tapestry, leaving a good visual margin all around, to the centre of the board using a curved needle and stitching over the warps at regular intervals; if preferred you can stitch your weaving to the backing fabric before covering the board, but this makes centring and tensioning of the cloth less accurate.

One further method is to pierce four lines of holes corresponding to the size and shape of the weaving through the mount card and stab stitch through them. A piece of card or board the exact size of your weaving can be covered and used as above with this placed centrally in the frame, giving greater depth to the finish. Whichever method you choose, make sure that the weaving is set back from the glass or framing section; if glass is required, seal it into the rebate, then seal the backing board into the frame to prevent insects making their way in.



TAPESTRY STITCHED
TO MOUNT BOARD.

Caring for your personal tapestry or textile: the two major elements that affect textiles are sunlight and heat, so it is important to choose a display site with care – neither in direct sunlight nor above a heat source such as a radiator or fireplace. Temperature and humidity levels should not fluctuate, but if the tapestry has to be displayed on an external wall it would be advisable to add a cotton lining to its reverse and to provide a physical space for the circulation of air by using a deeper batten (3 – 4cms). With framed textiles, provide air circulation by adding 0.5cm spacers/cork discs to each corner of the back of the frame (sliced up bottle corks are excellent!).

Care: from then on, 'good housekeeping' is key. Regularly check the tapestry for physical wear and accumulation of surface dust which may encourage unwanted insect infestation by moths or carpet beetles. These insects will probably head for the back of the textile to lay their eggs undetected; they are attracted to wool, silk and feathers. Carefully loosen surface dirt with a soft, sable brush or shaving brush, then gently vacuum in both directions using the upholstery brush attachment on a low suction setting, checking for insect larvae as you go. If the weaving is textured or has knotting and loose areas of yarn, place a nylon mesh screen between the surface and vacuum brush, moving systematically across the whole tapestry. Silverfish favour damp environments (e.g. external walls and skirtings), so could be an additional problem.

Spot cleaning is not advisable unless absolutely necessary because unsightly water staining can remain around the perimeter of the area cleaned. Small tapestries can be wet cleaned flat in a tray of lukewarm water using a 25% solution of Stergene or Woolite, but only if the colours are fast and the yarns are of similar fibres; be sure to rinse out all traces of detergent in several changes of lukewarm water. Shrinkage may occur with slight compaction of the wefts. For the cleaning of large tapestries always seek professional advice from a Textile Conservator.

Storage: always make sure that any tapestry going into storage is clean, and remember to check on its condition at regular intervals. Small weavings can be laid flat in a cool, dark space, and should be wrapped in acid-free tissue or cotton fabric to deter insects. Large tapestries should be carefully placed on a rigid roller-tube (10 – 15cms diameter) in the direction of the warps, right side out; if they are rolled reverse side out the wefts on the front become compacted. Wrap the rolled up tapestry in cotton sheeting, washed calico or Tyvek to form a protective wrapper and secure the cover with several cotton tapes; lay flat in a cool dark place with good air circulation.

References and Resources:

Whaleys (Bradford) Ltd (info@whaleysltd.co.uk): suppliers of plain weave fabrics and unbleached calico in a range of widths and weights.

MDN Supplies Ltd (sales@mdnsupplies.co.uk): suppliers of Velcro tape in various widths and colours.

ICON Conservation Register (www.conservationregister.com): where to find local accredited Textile Conservators.

DuPont Tyvek can be sourced by the metre on Etsy.
Nylon screening/Filtration mesh is available online.

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