



An HJS Studio Project:

Joan's Shawl



A friend of mine, Joan Sheridan Hoover, owner of Heritage Spinning and Weaving in Lake Orion, Michigan, asked me to make her a handspun shawl a number of years ago (I'm embarrassed to remember how many years ago it was!). She gave me a Polwarth fleece from Australia for the purpose. What lovely wool! Very soft and crimped, with much more sheen than I associate with finewools.

Unfortunately for Joan, I was scared of weaving with this fleece! I had done some scarves using Corriedale wool years ago (around 1989), and though I only soaked them after weaving to remove the gelatin sizing, they full'd so thoroughly that they had no drape at all after drying. Soft and cushy, yes, but a scarf (or shawl) without drape is really not a very pleasant accessory. So I dithered for several years over how to weave Joan's shawl out of this wonderful fleece and still have a useable item after it was full'd.

Finally, I started to feel enough was enough—it was time to get started. Piles of dyed, carded wool started to call me again. And then the ultimate motivation—Joan lives four hours away, but she was coming up for a meeting, and we would be able to connect for a little while. How fast could I spin and weave this shawl? From the time I sat down to spin the first warp skein to the time I finished trimming the last little ends off was parts of six days (two half days out of that time had to be spent doing other things)! Fortunately, though I needed to dye and card a little more wool, most of that was already done. Here's a little about the process of this project.



Design

First was coming up with some sort of concept for the shawl's design. I like to make each of my handspun, handwoven shawls really unique. I also wanted it to be to Joan's taste when finished. All she would say is she liked blues. That's not much to go on!

Eventually I decided to do something I've long been challenged by: To make yarn that suggests fire opals. With that in mind, I dyed lots of deep blues for the background, along with brights to be the flashes of color that opals are noted for.



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Planning the Warp

Some experimental spinning showed I was taking on a greater challenge than I thought. I did manage one yarn in which the blue was dark enough and the bits of color short enough that it really looked very opalish. But it was kind of chunky, and I didn't want chunky. I decided to plunge ahead, though, with a fairly fine yarn and streaks of bright color anyway, because there wasn't time to reconsider the design. This is not, by the way, a recommended way to design :)

I have a horizontal warping mill that is set up to do warps of 3.5 yards, 5.5 yards, 7.5 yards, etc warp lengths. I use the 3.5 yard / 3.2 meter length for my shawls. After loom waste, take-up, etc, the woven portion of the shawl is typically right around 90 inches / 225 cm. The warps are generally around or a little more than 30 inches / 75 cm wide in the reed. This makes a fairly generous finished shawl size, excluding the fringe.

Sett was a bit problematic for this project, because I hadn't worked with such a fine wool in a handspun, handwoven project in many years, and my previous experience hadn't been terribly successful. I originally planned a singles yarn of about 48 wraps per inch / 18 wraps per cm, sett at 24 ends to the inch / 10 ends to the cm, spun longdraw from strips of carded batt. I started to weave a small sample on my cardboard sample "loom" but it was tedious work, to say the least, so I didn't finish it. And then when I started to spin, the wool wanted to spin at about 38 wraps per inch / 15 wraps per cm anyway. I could have spent more time getting the size of the yarn just right, but I was short on time, so chose the path of least resistance and stuck with the thicker, easier-to-spin yarn.

I decided on a sett of 18 ends per inch / 7 ends per cm because I was doing a two-block 3/1 twill and wanted there to be plenty of room for the fulling yarns to expand without turning the shawl into cardboard. This meant I needed a little over 2000 yards / 1820 meters of warp yarn.

Spinning

I carded all the blues separately, then did layered batts of them for the background color. I also carded batts of lots of bright colors, and tore the smallest pieces I could manage, dumping them into a basket to spin into one of the warp skeins at random intervals. Unfortunately, the yarn was fine enough that the smallest pieces of carded batt I could pull apart still made quite long streaks of contrasting color in the warp singles. Not the effect I wanted, but oh well! Seemed to me the bits of brights against the blue background suited Joan's personality anyway. She comes across as serene and cheerful in the midst of chaos, though she may not recognize herself in this description :)

After filling the bobbin pretty well, I skeined the first warp singles and found it to be well over 500 yards / 450 meters. That meant I only needed four skeins to do the entire warp. Two more skeins were spun using the layered blue batts. The final skein was spun differently. I started out with a batt of blue-green, then I spun batts of bright blue, royal blue, and indigo, and ended with a batt of a bluish purple. It's very subtle, but can be seen in the finished shawl (if you look at it up close and personal).



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I used the tug test to check the warp yarn singles as I was spinning them. It was difficult to assess the twist angle because of the darkness of the color and the relative fineness of the yarn, but it appeared to be my usual 15 degrees.

I sized the warp yarns and hung them to dry, then spun the weft yarns. These were identical in size and twist to the warp, but were all layered batts of blues without adding any brights. Finally, I spun 2-ply yarns, using a true worsted draft on strips of drumcarded batt, for the selvages and hemstitching. These yarns I spun a little finer, about 45 wraps per inch / 17 wraps per cm, and I added a little more twist. It's been my experience that plied selvages only work if they have more twist than the warp singles have. I had forgotten to spin these yarns before sizing the warp yarns, so the selvages were not sized.

That led to a confirmation of something I read in Handwoven quite a while ago—the twist direction of the plying can lead to the shuttle actually untwisting the warp yarns on one side of the shed. In this case, the yarn was plied S, and the plied selvages on the right side of the shed tended to untwist. It never actually broke, but got close at one point. I was extra gentle throwing the shuttle and advanced the warp very frequently to reduce the strain on that selvage until I got past the weak area. Next time I hope I'll remember to size my selvage yarns!



Weaving

I warped the loom as usual, threading it to a two-block 3/1 twill pattern which I devised by sketching a pattern of stripes suggested by rolling a die. I chose the pattern I liked best of four I created this way. The pattern is more textural than anything else, another subtle detail that you have to get pretty close to really see.



The weaving went quite well. With a gentle beat, I was able to weave a nearly balanced 3/1 twill. No ends broke, to my surprise—I usually have 2-3 breaks. As with my daughter's coat, though, I did have problems with kinks in the warp yarns that dried in place after sizing. In this picture, you can see little holes left where the weft was deflected by the stiff, kinked warp ends. For the most part, this washed out just fine, but I did have to gently pull some of the warp ends to distribute their loops through the cloth so it would be less noticeable. Also, in a couple places, the looseness ended up causing the weft to miss going under or over where it was supposed to. Some of those I fixed on the loom, some I fixed after cutting the shawl off.



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Finishing

After finishing the weaving, I hemstitched the end and cut it off the loom. I twisted the warp ends in groups of eight, which looks kind of clunky to me and seems out of scale with the fineness of the cloth. I fixed a few more mistakes, and then plunged into washing and fulling the shawl.

I was quite worried about this, but it went very well indeed. I filled the washer with very hot water and added a little liquid dish detergent. I put in the shawl, poking it below the surface with a stick. I then agitated it on delicate (which, in my washing machine, is very slow and gentle) for about three minutes. I let the shawl soak for about a half hour before spinning out the water.

I then removed the shawl, refilled the washer with warm water, agitated a couple minutes, and spun it out again. A final rinse in cold with a little agitation. I checked the shawl at each stage, amazed that the fulling was just right. Finally, I threw it in the dryer and tumbled it on delicate (very little heat) for about five minutes. This takes any wrinkles left by spinning out the water in the washing machine. Last of all, I draped the shawl over my loom to finish drying. The shawl lost over four inches / 10 cm in width when washed.



The final handle of this cloth is unbelievably soft, drapeable, and light. So different from the Corrie scarves I made! I have figured out, with another three years of working with wools under my belt, that this Polwarth fleece had a very silky handle, whereas the Corriedale I worked with before was rather crisp in handle. Silkier wools seem to full (not felt) less than crisp-handling wools.

Now I know I can use finewools in my handspun, handwoven projects I will be looking for raw fleeces and having lots of fun. I do like the medium wools I worked with before, but the softest of those can't come close to the feel of this Polwarth fleece.



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