

The Peter Collingwood Ethnographic Collection

by Jean Vacher, 2009

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Introduction

In 2009 the Crafts Study Centre acquired with the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund's 'Collecting Cultures' scheme, the internationally significant Peter Collingwood collections. These include his ethnographic collection, tools, samples (including rug samples and braids), a number of finished pieces, and a no less important paper archive of documents. These holdings now complement the Centre's existing collection of macroguazes and braids. It is however, with the ethnographic collection of over 730 items that this paper is concerned.



Figs. 1 and 2: Woven hat (2009.22.353)

Peter referred to it sometimes as his 'ethno' collection and at others as his 'world textile' collection. Textile-focused it certainly is but a large number of items are clearly non-textile in the sense of being 'cloth'. They are there because of Peter's all-absorbing fascination with structure and the ingenious ways in which these items were made, be it a woven hat (Figs. 1 and 2) olive press (Fig. 3), jeep seat (Fig. 4), winnowing basket or a piece of industrial copper mesh. In their originating cultures these functional objects were grounded in everyday use or at the other extreme, shrouded in symbolism, for example an Ekpe secret society costume from the Cross River People of Nigeria (Fig. 5).



Fig. 3: Olive press (2009.22.180) and **Fig 4:** Jeep seat (2009.22.112)

For Peter all these were all a journey into the mind of the maker.

*"Behind my magnifying goggles, looking closely, I feel I have made journeys into the minds of these skilled anonymous makers; journeys which have greatly increased my respect for them."*¹



Fig. 5: Ekpe secret society costume from the Cross River People of Nigeria (2009.22.539)

This curiosity is at the heart of understanding his ethnographic collection. It fuelled his inventive mind and interest in structures and how they were produced and led to the writing and publication of a series of books on technique. *Textiles and Weaving Structures: A Source Book for Makers and Designers* published in 1987 (revised edition *The Maker's Hand: A Close Look at Textile Structures* in 1998) relates specifically to the Collection. Some 100 illustrated items from the Collection are analysed, described and organised by Peter under the heading of techniques: linking, interlacing, ply-splitting, wrapping and so forth. Technique, structure and invention always came first and the Ethnographic Collection reflects this.

Background to the Acquisition

Before the Peter Collingwood collections were acquired, the trustees of the Crafts Study Centre had agreed to use part of a bequest made by the spinner Morfudd Roberts to support a project that would enable Peter to document all four collections: the ethnographic, samples, tools and archives. This would in turn enable an informed decision to be made between Peter and the Centre regarding what might be purchased and/or gifted. It also served to record information about these collections, which if available in the public domain would increase greater awareness of Peter's work. It was not, however, until 2008 when the Centre learnt that its application to the Heritage Lottery Fund's 'Collecting Cultures' scheme had been successful, that the purchasing power to acquire the collections became a reality.

With the assistance of a writer and curator, Peter undertook the project to catalogue these collections on a database. The ethnographic database had the specific aim of capturing information and comments in Peter's own words. This has provided a highly valuable reference tool and source of information for scholarly and academic research. The nature of the collection; the variety of objects, techniques and materials it contains broadens its appeal to other craft disciplines, and inspires contemporary practice. Its global reach defined by objects collected from over 50 countries makes it a potential mine for the ethnographer and anthropologist.

The database follows a simple formula in which each object is described by Peter according to technique, material, date made (where known), date and place collected (where recalled), country of origin and maker (where known). Crucial additions to these descriptions are Peter's own comments about an object. This could be an in-depth analysis of a woven structure or a simple response to how he felt about it. The exercise has therefore given us a glimpse into Peter's creative thinking and a degree of accuracy of information about the objects in the Collection that would otherwise have been lost had the project not been undertaken. Poignantly, it was completed shortly before Peter's sudden death in the same year that the project was undertaken.

Background to Peter's collecting activity and his position in 20th century craft and design

Peter's collecting activity began as early as 1946 whilst working for the Red Cross in Transjordan. Working with Arab refugees he became captivated by the people, the country and significantly by Beduin weaving. Peter describes this as the defining moment when he decided that he wanted to become a weaver. He was in the process of completing his training as a doctor, specialising in surgery at St Mary's Medical School, Imperial College London, so to do so meant a radical change in career direction, and departure from a distinguished profession. A number of items including headdresses, (**Fig. 6**) dress fronts (**Figs. 7 and 8**) and a woollen cloak embroidered with metal thread (**Fig. 9**) are recorded as purchases made whilst with the Red Cross, and before starting his full time weaving career. However, these were early days and his collecting was to run alongside his career as a textile designer and weaver from the 1950s, culminating in international recognition by the close of the 20th century.



Fig. 6: Headdress (2009.22.256)

His career began in 1953 when he set up a workshop in London. It was here that he developed a distinctive style of rug making which earned him recognition and a market through influential stores such as Heals, Liberty and Primavera. Prior to this however, he had trained with the pioneering modernist weavers Ethel Mairet (**Fig. 10**), Barbara Sawyer and Alastair Morton. His time at Mairet's studio in Ditchling was important in terms of his

developing ideas on loom technology and design. He was moreover, exposed to her collection of world textiles and the lens through which she viewed them. During an interview with Linda Theophilus in 1998 he had this to say about the influence of her collection on his work:

“Yes, and to the textiles from around the world, which she had collected. She had lots of books and samples, which I could go through, and see how the loom had been set up to produce this or that pattern.”²



Figs. 7 and 8: Dress fronts (2009.22.259 and 2009.22.260)

His international standing grew through teaching in the UK (including a part-time research post at The West Surrey College of Art and Design, now University for the Creative Arts, 1969-71) and the USA and the move in 1958 to Digswell House in Welwyn Garden City where he met the celebrated potter Hans Coper. It was at this time that he developed his innovative macrogaze wall hangings on a new type of loom designed by him. This freed the warp from the necessity of lying parallel with the selvedge and resulted in simple but dramatic designs.



Fig. 9: Woollen cloak embroidered with metal thread (2009.22.255) and **Fig. 10:** Ethel Mairet

In 1964 Peter moved to Nayland in Essex where he set up a studio (**Figs. 11 and 12**) in a former Victorian school and remained there for the rest of his life. It was here that he applied the unique multiple ridged heddle technique to his wall hangings. In 1969 a major exhibition at the V&A Museum in which he showed new work alongside that of Hans Coper was ground breaking in terms of paving the way for his standing as a pre-eminent international designer. He was the first living weaver to be invited to show in the Museum, and exhibited rugs made using his shaft switching technique and macrogazes which he had developed earlier.



Figs. 11 and 12: Peter Collingwood and his studio

In addition to rug weaving and the macroguaze wall hangings, Peter developed work based on the historic techniques of sprang, ply-split and tablet weaving. This went hand-in-hand with his collecting activity and a series of technique-based publications which furthered an understanding of traditional weaving methods found throughout the world. *The Maker's Hand* is the most relevant to understanding the Collection. His son Jason wrote of him:

*"If he wasn't working on the loom he would inevitably be upstairs on the balcony, hunched over a textile he'd been sent, magnifying glasses on, analysing how it had been made...He would spend hours doing this, completely lost in his world. It was a challenge and the sort of thing he loved to do, and because of this, the book that gave him the greatest pleasure to write was 'The Maker's Hand', in which he picked favourite objects he owned, and described in detail how each was made."*³

Some defining characteristics of the Collection

Most collecting is based on a rationale. As far as this Collection is concerned the rationale is driven by technique and a desire to understand weave structures. However, aside from the astonishing number and variety of objects that it contains, there are a number of interesting and defining characteristics which reflect its global reach.



Figs. 13 and 14: Double and triple-woven cloths using experimental yarns (2009.22.609 and 2009.22.608)

There is for example, the Collection's context within the mid to late 20th century history of textile design. Peter recognised that Ethel Mairet (1872 - 1952) was one of the first British weavers to apply traditional weaving techniques to contemporary design - an artist rather than weaver who mechanically threw a shuttle to weave derivative designs. The world was moving on as Peter's collecting progressed and opening up discussions at an international level within a global weaving community. The Collection and the names associated with it reflect this.



Figs. 15, 16 and 17: Exhibition poster made from polyester and aluminium melt-off yarn (2009.22.606)

For example, Peter received gifts for his Collection from friends and associates who were themselves major figures in 20th century weaving design or research. This international reach includes the USA, India, Japan, South America, Sweden, Holland, Germany and Denmark. Sometimes they were made by the giver, in other cases collected on Peter's behalf. Names include for example, the innovative Japanese weaver Junichi Arai. Their friendship was to culminate in a major collaborative public commission in Japan for the new cultural centre in the textile town of Kiryu City in 1996. Peter's heavy and dramatic three-dimensional structure hangs against a huge concrete wall in the entrance hall. Considered a feat of ingenuity, it is made from stainless steel yarn sourced by Junichi Arai. Pieces in the Collection made by Arai include samples of double (Fig. 13) and triple-woven (Fig. 14) cloths using experimental yarns, an exhibition poster (Figs. 15, 16, and 17) made from polyester and aluminium melt-off yarn and a fabric length (Fig. 18) of synthetic fibres in which the fibreglass fibres are purposefully creased to show rainbow colours. Most of the pieces were machine-woven under the direction of Arai and illustrate his drive to create experimental work of great imagination. With reference to the triple cloth, Peter commented that "it plays tricks with squares of very different sizes on each side". Such experimental pieces are about innovation in textile techniques. Alongside these items sit pieces gifted by Arai made by unknown craftsmen, such as a fighter pilot's vest (Fig. 19), worn for warmth and made from un-spun silk floss.



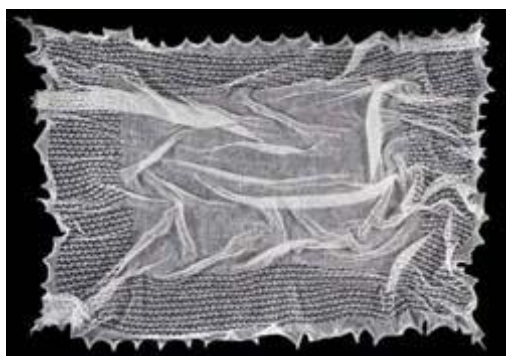
Fig. 18: Fabric length of synthetic fibres in which the fibreglass fibres are purposefully creased to show rainbow colours (2009.22.610)

Considering the Collection at a global level, there are examples of how traditions in textiles making are changing to improve the lives of people found in remote areas of the world. For example, the people of the Sankhuwasabha District of eastern Nepal who are producing woven and knitted products for export using the fibres of the Himalayan Giant Nettle or 'Allo' plant. Situated in the foothills of the Himalayas, the people of this region have for centuries woven products for local consumption. However, with the encouragement and support of the Nepalese Nettle-Fibre Sustainable Income Development Project they have innovated and diversified to produce items for export (**Figs. 20 and 21**). In some cases the weaving can be so fine that it is possible to pass the piece through a finger ring.⁴



Fig. 19: Fighter pilot's vest (2009.22.611)

These are but some examples of the interplay between people, research, objects and weaving practice found in Peter's Collection. The cast of names associated with the Collection continues, but is beyond the scope of this paper.



Figs. 20 and 21: Items for export produced by the people of the Sankhuwasabha District of eastern Nepal (2009.22.301 and 2009.22.302)

Weaving techniques

Peter published four books focusing on textile techniques. These are *The Techniques of Rug weaving* (1968), *The Techniques of Sprang* (1974), *Rug Weaving Techniques: Beyond the Basics* (1990) and *The Technique of Ply-split Braiding* (1998). Through their depth and insight into each discipline they are recognised as ground-breaking. The virtuosity of technique listed in the Collection, both weaving and non-weaving is great: appliqué, coiling, cord-making, braiding, beading, crochet, embroidery, felting, gauze weaving, knitting, knotting, interlacing looping, inter-connected looping, macramé, netting, stitching, tapestry, tating, twinning, weft-twinning and wrapping. However, in terms of their representation in the Collection and important vis-à-vis Peter's publications, tablet weaving and ply-split weaving are arguably the two single most important groups.

Tablet weaving

Peter's involvement with tablet weaving and plan to write a book on this technique was by far the oldest but had been delayed by his absorption with ply-split braiding. The Techniques of Tablet Weaving describes itself as 'the most comprehensive survey of tablet weaving technique available'. It was portentous for the Crafts Study Centre because he states in this book, published in 1996 that:

*"It is always my aim to bridge the gap between the crafts and the museum world."*⁵

It was only a little over a decade later that his historic collection of tablet weaving which had informed so much of his own practice and teaching, would form part of a museum collection dedicated to the crafts, and to furthering an understanding of this historic technique.

Out of a collection of 734 items there are less than 40 examples of tablet weaving. This is not a great number, but their significance lies in the position that tablet weaving holds in the history of weaving, as an ancient technique with a global reach. It is a traditional form of weaving that has not changed for the last 2,300 years, and like ply-split braiding is a portable loom technique suited to a nomadic existence, or agrarian-based cultures where weaving can be combined with other activities outside of the home using portable equipment. Warp yarns are raised and lowered by turning flat tablets or cards, through which they are threaded. The tablets can be manipulated in an infinite variety of combinations to produce many, complex structures and patterns, thus with the potential to innovate. Faced with the argument that the technique has failed to develop, Peter states that:

*"On the contrary, it is a case of the tablets being unspecialised and therefore sharing with other unspecialised tools an almost limitless potential; in the hands of a creative worker, there is nothing tablets cannot do."*⁶



Fig. 22: Dagger belt made in Yemen (2009.22.128.1-2) and **Fig. 23:** Band (2009.22.140)

Tablet weaving is found throughout the world from the Americas through to China, North Africa, Asia and parts of Europe. Like ply-split braiding it has evolved in agrarian-based communities where portable equipment can be taken out of the home and the technique practiced alongside other activities such as goat herding. Peter's collecting covered Iran, northern India, Pakistan, Yemen, Anatolia, Greece, Tibet, Bhutan, Indonesia, Burma and Uzbekistan. The ply-split braided items peculiar to this collection pertain mainly to use on animals, and of necessity are made of robust and hard-wearing materials suited to function, such as goat's hair. The tablet-woven pieces are made for human use; bands, sashes, belts and bags. Of some interest for example is a sword belt made of silk and cotton with a bark cloth insert, made by the Buginese, a nomadic Malayan people of south-western, Sulawesi. He thought that this was "a real treasure" using "hundreds of tablets". A dagger belt Made in Yemen (**Fig. 22**) made in cotton with a large area of brocading with metallic thread and additional superficial cross bands, was a purchase made by Peter from a 'junk shop' in Nayland which he had seen in the window. He had stuck a note in the shop saying "please reserve it for me"⁷. There are two bands (**Fig. 23**), one a fragment, originating from Ladakh, which is a northernmost state in India, close to the Himalayas. Both are late 20th century and made in

cotton. A pyjama cord (**Fig. 24**) made in Pakistan, c. 1970 uses warp twining, with reversals in cotton. Originating from Tibet but purchased from a Tibet house emporium in Delhi is a bag (**Fig. 25**) made of cotton and silk and constructed of tablet weaving strips sewn together - some double faced, some warp twined.



Fig. 24: Pyjama cord made in Pakistan, c. 1970 (2009.22.139) and
Fig. 25: Bag originating from Tibet (2009.22.147)

There are a small number of items originating from western cultures such as the USA, Germany and Holland. For example, a band (**Fig. 26**), and copy of a Persian design in silk, woven by Otfried Staudigel, author of two books on the tablet weaving traditions of Burma, Tibet and Tunisia, which has a warp twined edge and double-faced centre panel. From the USA is a band (**Fig. 27**) woven by Alexia Smith in silk which Peter thought was a "very nice thing made of endless variations; tablets all threaded with 3 light, 1 dark threads". These Western examples demonstrate the new and growing interest in the technique and its application to contemporary design, often as a result of Peter's dissemination of this through publication and teaching.



Fig. 26: band woven by Otfried Staudigel (2009.22.135) and
Fig. 27: band woven by Alexia Smith (2009.22.133)

Ply-split braiding

Idiosyncrasies are often a feature of personal collections. Given the preponderance of camel girths and animal harness and regalia that it includes, this Collection appears to be no exception. Of the 730 items in the Collection there are over 170 (**Fig. 28**) *tang* (camel girth), *gorbandh* (decorative camel necklace) and *ihoum* (**Fig. 29**)

(decorative piece hanging from a camel saddle). This number does not include associated material such as muzzles (**Fig. 30**), headdresses and fringe (**Fig. 31**). Most of this material originates from India and was acquired either directly by Peter on the field trips he undertook to analyse weaving techniques in the late 1980s/early 1990s, or via contacts. However, on closer inspection there is a rationale for the presence of this group of material in the Collection.



Fig. 28: Collection of camel girths, animal harnesses and regalia

Items in particular from the Gujarat and Rajasthan regions of India collected during five field trips form the focus for his publication *The Techniques of Ply-split Braiding*, published in 1998. Ply-split braiding is a fabric structure whereby one cord goes through the separated plies of another cord. It was an entirely unknown technique in the West. Peter had been introduced to the technique on a fibre forum in the USA where a camel girth was shown. Peter was the first to suggest that it was produced by splitting and penetrating cords. Previous writing had been published on this technique.⁸ However, Peter's was the first comprehensive reference book on the subject with full instructions, and opened up the potential for it to be practiced as an exciting new medium in contemporary craft. According to the internationally-acclaimed braiding specialist Noémi Speiser (see below), who worked closely with Peter on these techniques, they presented towering problems and an entirely new nomenclature for this never-described technique had to be created.



Fig. 29: *ihoum* (decorative piece hanging from a camel saddle) (2009.22.500)

Traditionally, in India the technique is limited to the making of flat, two-dimensional structures for use as animal harness. Peter's book with its detailed analysis of structure has enabled an understanding of how to apply ply-split braiding to the making of an unlimited number of three-dimensional shapes or forms, such as jewellery, shoes, baskets, wall hangings or sculptural works. Moreover, whereas ply-split braided camel girths have used goat hair and cotton, this newly-recovered genre based on an ancient technique employs a wide range of yarns such as paper, linen, hemp and silk. Therefore, Peter and then modern textile designers who learned the technique from his courses and later from his book began to use modern yarns.

The Collection therefore acts as an important bridge between Peter's thinking and his influence on the development of innovative contemporary weaving practice which has found expression in such exhibitions as *Expanding the Girths, an exhibition of traditional and contemporary ply-split braiding* held at West Ox Arts Gallery, Bampton, September 28 - October 21, 2001. This exhibition which included Peter's work, showed the work of 28 artists from the UK, Japan, India, Switzerland, the USA and Japan and illustrated how ply-split braiding can be

practised in both traditional and non-representational ways, using new and imaginative materials. It was accompanied by Spliterati-01, the first international convention to be held on ply-split braiding. This was followed in 2004 by a second international exhibition *Beyond Tradition: contemporary Ply-Split Fibre Sculpture* held in Portland, Oregon in 2004.



Fig. 30: Muzzle (2009.22.282) and **Fig. 31:** Fringe (2009.22.449)

The material used in Indian tangs is generally hand-spun black and white goat hair or goat hair and machine-spun cotton. A number of tangs in the Collection however, are in two or three colours, and many use POT (plain oblique twining) or SCOT technique (single course oblique twining) or sections of SCOT and POT. The majority are made in either goat hair or a combination of goat hair and cotton. Many end in decorative braids or tassels and are embellished with beads. In India camels and the making of girths are considered the preserve of men, and whilst many of the items in the Collection are anonymously made, camel girth makers such as Iswhar Singh Bhati and Kharna Bhima are listed in *The Techniques of Ply-Split Braiding* and in the documentation relating to the Collection. The use of goat's hair imparts strength to the object, makes it hard-wearing and well-suited to use in animal harness.

There are also a large number of bridles and animal regalia present in the Collection. Some of these were special purchases, such as a bridle bought from Mr. Kalu Ram Lahtialmer in Jaisalmer which Peter thought was very cleverly made and the only example of one-ply-splitting he had seen. He was so keen to have it that he bought it 'from the camel's head'⁹. The complicated making sequence is described in his book *The Techniques of Ply-Split Braiding*.¹⁰ There are also examples of traditional three-dimensional ply-split items, such as a Zulu rattle (Fig. 32) from South Africa made from plant fibre and a pot holder made from goat hair from Jaisalmer, India (Fig. 33).



Fig. 32: Zulu rattle from South Africa (2009.22.328) and **Fig. 33:** Pot holder from Jaisalmer, India (2009.22.556)

In 1969 a long and fruitful correspondence began between Peter and Noémi Speiser. Speiser had initially encouraged and supported Peter in writing *The Techniques of Sprang*. Their exploration of ply-splitting came later. She helped relentlessly in searching for books and in travelling to places for analysing certain pieces, challenging him constantly to increase his knowledge and interest in the question of oblique interlacing. As a result of gradually increasing her knowledge new discoveries were shared with him and a terminology developed by Speiser. Peter in return helped correct the texts for her books in English. Several items in the Collection speak of this shared passion for 'off-loom' techniques. There is a pair of dyed rush shoes from Rumania (**Fig. 34**), which she gave to Peter, in red and green plant fibre, using weft twining. These are of particular interest because they were analysed in detail by Speiser and have associated diagrams (**Fig. 35**).



Fig. 34: Pair of dyed rush shoes from Rumania (2009.22.169.1-2) and **Fig. 35:** Associated diagram

Several items in Peter's samples collection, also acquired with the support of the Heritage Lottery 'Collecting Cultures' grant might be said to demonstrate the influence of the Ethnographic Collection on Peter's work, and the ways in which the three-dimensional properties of ply-split braiding are explored. These forms are largely vessels; bowls, dishes and pots, made in the late 1990s/early 2000s (**Figs. 36-42**). Many are made using stiff materials such as Indian jute rope, horse hair, hemp and linen cord.



Figs. 36-42: Bowls, dishes and pots made in the late 1990s/early 2000s
Fig. 36: (2011.10.4) and **Fig. 37:** (2011.10.5)



Fig. 38: (2011.10.6) and **Fig. 39:** (2011.10.7)



Fig. 40: (2011.10.14)



Fig.41: (2011.10.13) and **Fig.42:** (2011.10.11)

Sprang

Some mention should be made of the technique of sprang, which given Peter's absorption with, and subsequent publication on the subject is surprisingly underrepresented in the Collection. There are only a half dozen items which include mainly bags from South America and a Berber woman's head band from Tunisia.

Rug weaving

Peter's collection of rug samples is currently being catalogued. It again numbers several hundred items and will be available to see by appointment. This is an important reference source for understanding Peter's experimental work.

Conclusion

There are many ways in which Peter's Ethnographic Collection can be accessed. It is a window into other cultures and craft practices across large sections of the globe. For each item there is the potential to take a multi-disciplinary approach. In terms of its breadth, range of objects and materials it is a visual feast. A more nebulous task however, is to make links between a group of objects and their influence on the collector's creative output. The Collection undoubtedly fed Peter's imagination and was an inspiration to him. By going through it item by item he may have reflected upon how he could adopt, adapt and reconfigure the ideas he discovered there into his own highly innovative practice. The Peter Collingwood collections by entering the Crafts Study Centre collections have without doubt, brought a great asset into the public domain.

The Crafts Study Centre's current year-long exhibition 'Sourcing the World' (until 27 December 2011) showcases items from Peter Collingwood's Ethnographic Collection alongside his own work. Supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund 'Collecting Cultures' scheme, it is the first time that the Collection has been made available to the public.

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³ Collingwood, Jason, 'Reflections on my Father', *Journal for Weavers, Spinners and Dyers*, Summer 2009, Peter Collingwood, Special Edition, p. 5.

⁴ Dunsmore, S., *The Nettle in Nepal*, John Dunsmore Nepalese Textile trust, 2006.

⁵ *The Techniques of Tablet Weaving*, Faber and Faber Limited, London, 1982, p. 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Quoted in the Ethnographic Collection's associated documentation.

⁸ Quick, Betsy D. & Stein, Judith A. (1982) Pamphlet Series Vol. 1, Number 7.

⁹ Quoted in the Ethnographic Collection's associated documentation.

¹⁰ *The Technique of Ply-split Braiding*, Unicorn Books and Crafts, Inc. Petaluma, California, USA, 1998, p. 191-192, plate 109.