

Newsletter

A Weaver Looks at Tinguian Blankets

Kathleen Forance Johnson with Yushan Tsai

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THE TEXTILE SOCIETY OF AMERICA, INC., PROVIDES AN INTERNATIONAL FORUM FOR THE EXCHANGE AND DISSEMINATION OF INFORMATION ABOUT TEXTILES WORLDWIDE, FROM ARTISTIC, CULTURAL, ECONOMIC, HISTORIC, POLITICAL, SOCIAL, AND TECHNICAL PERSPECTIVES.

IN 1898 THE AMERICAN Commodore, George Dewey, defeated the Spanish fleet in the Battle of Manila Bay, ending the period of Spanish domination of the Philippines, and the archipelago was annexed by the United States of America. In the early years of the American Colonial Period, anthropologist Laura E Benedict was working to document indigenous tribal cultures in the southern Philippines. In 1907 she wrote an urgent letter, now in the Field Museum archives, to Dr. George Amos Dorsey, Curator of Anthropology at the Field Museum in Chicago. In it she detailed the rapid disintegration of the lifestyle and culture of hitherto pristine, "wild" tribal groups in her area.

Newly arrived American planters and entrepreneurs were establishing large plantations to grow the lucrative "Manila hemp," *abaca*. Seeking plentiful and cheap labor, they built whole towns for settlement by tribal groups who were lured in from their villages with promises of an easier and richer life. True, the tribes went willingly, and

they enjoyed some of the new amenities offered, but Benedict deplored that their original cultures would never again be seen in their undisturbed, natural settings.

Worse yet, those cultures had not been systematically documented in those original settings by professional observers.



1. Fay and Mable Cooper-Cole in the Philippines, 1906. Photo Archives of the Field Museum, Chicago.

Miss Benedict made an impassioned plea for a team of anthropologists to study and record the endangered cultures of what remained of the "wild tribes" of the Philippines. Luckily, Dorsey heeded the call and dispatched his able assistant, Fay Cooper-

Cole (1881-1961), to take up the challenge. Cole studied a group of isolated and little-known mountain people from 1907-1908 during a stay of 16 months for the Field Columbian Museum.

Cole called these people Tinguian but they have always referred to themselves as "Itneg" and that is how they are known in much of the literature. Here we have used the terms interchangeably. At Cole's time, the Tinguian/Itneg were among the least known of the many Philippine ethnic groups. They were head hunters living in the most remote mountainous region of the Cordilleras in the Abra district of Northern Luzon. Thanks to the rugged terrain and their habit of taking the heads of intruders, they were not settled into towns by the Spanish or Christianized by early missionaries.

Into this dangerous territory Cole was accompanied by his wife, Mable, and together they made an impressive team. Working together closely in their investigations, they each had unique qualities to offer. Mable

Tinguian from page 1

made friends with the women, and perhaps because of her influence, we have a detailed account of the processes of weaving, spinning, garment production, and other domestic activities. The couple developed a respectful, friendly, and accepting attitude toward the people they were living among and studying, and were even made honorary members of the tribe! Largely because of this, they left the Tinguian having made many friends, and with their heads and lives intact. A colleague working in a nearby tribe was not so lucky.

The Coles amassed a wealth of information, a sizable collection of artifacts, and many interesting photographs taken in difficult circumstances. All of this material was brought back to the US, where it is still housed in the Field Museum, Chicago. Their considerable contributions helped to establish one of the largest and most comprehensive Philippines collections in the Western Hemisphere. The publications of their findings provided a valuable snapshot of an ancient culture that changed rapidly once contacts with the outside world were opened. Mable published her own memoir, *Savage Gentlemen*, in 1929. It gives us a lively sense of her feelings and perspectives on their experience with the Tinguian, and makes fascinating reading. Luckily, many of these publications, long out of print, have now been digitized and are available online at Gutenberg Books.¹

The Cole collection of Tinguian/Itneg material culture includes a group of magnificent hand-woven ceremonial blankets and the looms on which they were created. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to examine and photograph the textiles, weaving equipment, and original photo albums from this collection at the Field Museum. As a practicing weaver, I can appreciate the masterful weaving skill, aesthetic composition of

color and motif, and fine precision in execution and finishing which went into their creation. To see such beautiful works of textile art woven on the simplest of looms is both awe-inspiring and humbling.

The Blankets: *Owes*

The mountainous region of Northern Luzon, The Philippines, is known as the Cordilleras. At the time the Coles visited the Tinguian, these people shared the region with a number of other tribes. The Kankanay, Bontoc, Gaddang and Ifugao were weavers, while the Isneg, Ilongot, and Ibaloi were not, so they had to trade for their textile needs with their weaving neighbors. In either case, all groups valued the textiles in their lives and used them not only for utilitarian purposes (Figs. 2 and 3), but for many rituals marking life events from birth to death, and beyond. Whether self-manufactured or traded, fine textiles bestowed status upon the owner. Considering the amount of time, skill, and resources the women devoted to weaving them, it is not surprising that they constituted a form of wealth in a mostly non-monetary society.²

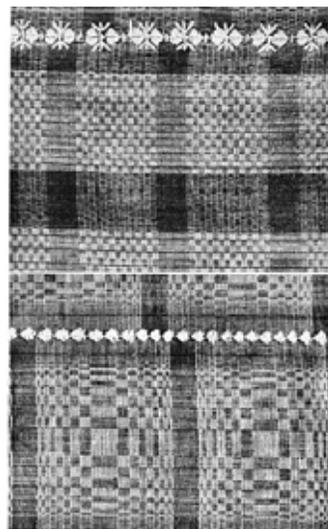
Blankets are called *owes*³ in Itneg, and they comprise an important, large category of Itneg textile production. Some are plain utilitarian types, while others are lavishly patterned and were used primarily on ceremonial and ritual occasions. Cole describes the inside of a typical Tinguian house where textiles were much in evidence. "At one end of the room a set of pegs, deer horns, or a cord supports a variety of clothes, blankets, a woman's switch, and perhaps a man's belt. The sleeping-mats either hang here or occupy a rack of their own. Below the cord stand chests secured in early years through trade with the Chinese. In these are the family treasures, valuable beads, coins, blankets, ceremonial objects and the like. Piled on the boxes is a



2. Tinguian figured ceremonial blanket similar to one in the Field Museum collection. Photo: Fay Cooper-Cole Negative archive #29170, Album 1, "Man wrapped in a blanket, Lagangilang N." 1907. Field Museum, Chicago.

large variety of pillows, for no Tinguian house is complete without a number of these. The other house furnishings, consisting of a spinning wheel, loom, coconut rasp, and clothes beater find space along the other wall."⁴ In a sparsely furnished house, textiles and textile-related items were a sizable part of the inventory.

The mountain dwelling Itneg and their neighbors, the more settled and Christianized coastal dwelling Ilocano, shared a good deal of cultural affinity and



interaction, including similar textile traditions and technology.⁵ Some of the blankets I looked at in the Field Museum were actually Ilocano but fit well with the Tinguian part of the collection. Cole treats the Tinguian and Ilocano as two branches of the same people, rather like the story of the country and city mouse cousins. Both have made adjustments to their different circumstances.

The patterns in the blankets reflect the natural environment: mountains, forest, plants, celestial bodies, animals, insects, birds and people. The folklore traces the origins of many of these patterns back to the dreams and visions of an old, blind weaver, Apo Kisamay.⁶ These patterns were made using the *pinilian* technique, meaning "selected." This continuous supplementary-weft technique uses two wefts: a thin one for the ground weave, and a thicker one for the pattern. To select warps she wants to skip in order to make pattern, the weaver places them on a "pickup stick," weaves the pattern shot, and then weaves the ground-weave shot (Fig. 4).

When using this technique the weaver has almost infinite design possibilities at her disposal, limited only by time, patience, imagination, and aesthetic sensibility. Even the simplest back-strap loom can produce designs of great beauty and complexity, but it is very time-consuming. A good patterning and labor-saving device may be made by using a series of pattern heddle sticks, one for each shot of the pattern (Fig. 5). The warps to be used for pattern are selected and attached to the stick by a string heddle made by winding string between warp and heddle stick. When raised one after the other for each shot of the pattern, these sticks pull up the required

3. left, Binakul blanket pattern similar to the one in Fig. 2 and in the Cole collection in the Field Museum, Chicago. Photo: Cole, *The Tinguian*, plate #LXXIV.



4. Tinguian *impaod* loom set up for weaving *pinilian* patterns on a plain weave ground. It is set up with a series of 16 pattern sticks, plain weave ground sticks, a warp spacer (top) and reed. The *baliga* or weaving sword is shown closest to the weaver after the shuttle. The *baliga* was considered a weaver's talisman. The Field Museum, Chicago. "Tinguian backstrap loom, Field Museum #108907, 1908.1060, code 3456)

threads for each shot. The warp shed is then changed to one of the ground weave sheds, and the thinner weft passed through to create the plain weave ground. The weaver beats the weft into place with the shed sword, *Baliga*, which was considered a weaver's talisman by the Itneg.

The group of women in Fig. 6 are working at spinning and warp winding, and their apparent working methods are of special interest to me. The technology involved in the warp preparation and loom setup appears to be virtually the same as that used by the Atayal in Taiwan.⁷ I learned

to weave on this kind of loom from an old, accomplished Atayal weaver when I lived in Taiwan. The continuous warp is wound simultaneously with the formation of heddle loops on heddle sticks, *gorod*. The warp controller rod, *leteta*, is also wound to keep the threads in order and to help control the tension of individual warp threads.⁸ It is a very ancient technology dating back to pre-historic China, but efficient, and so has changed little in the intervening centuries.⁹

When all is ready, two thick rods, which act as cloth and warp beams respectively, are

inserted and the whole is tipped out and hung up, ready for weaving as in Figs. 4 and 5.

In the finished setup, warp threads pass through a reed, which Yushan Tsai, based on her work with Taiwan aboriginal weaving, thinks may open from the top. This way the warp threads can be

evenly distributed in the spaces between reed bars. This helps to space the warps and keep them in order, preventing tangles. Also note in Fig. 5 the intersecting bamboo poles on the ground in front of the weaver and under her loom. The side poles are braced against the wall and the cross beam provides her with a secure foot brace, as well as a clever way to extend the possible weaving length of the warp. A T-shaped arrangement of the brace is also used by the Itneg, and I saw an example of this in the Field Museum collection.

Ceremonial Blankets

The Tinguian made and used a variety of blankets, *owes*, in

their daily lives. Most were of handspun, naturally white cotton in plain weave or twill. These blankets were composed of two or three narrow panels, usually no wider than the weaver's shoulders, joined by neat stitches at the seams. Simple cotton blankets were used for many purposes in daily life. Even a popular dance, the "tadek" or "horse dance,"¹⁰ was performed on many celebratory occasions by couples who flapped and waved their blankets as they advanced and retreated to the horse-like rhythm of a percussion accompaniment (Fig. 7). The horse is a symbol of power, grace, and bravery, and there is a large category of blankets which uses the motif. These seem to be among the most valued of the figured blankets. The pattern commemorates the death of a nobleman or warrior.¹¹ It also makes reference to the god of agriculture, Indadaya, who is highly revered and invited to every ritual or feast, especially those related to agriculture (Fig. 8).

Cole describes one type of blanket which was believed to be possessed by a spirit. The *Inalson* is "a sacred blanket made of

white cotton. A blue or blue and red design is formed, where the breadths join, and also along the borders" (Fig. 9).¹² Another interpretation of this textile calls it *inal-alsong* and describes it as "A white cotton cloth with dark blue trimmings featuring warp float designs of Xs, and diamond forms representing rice mortar



5. Woman weaving on the backstrap loom, *inlaod*. Notice the bamboo warp extender/foot brace and multiple pattern heddle sticks. She is weaving *pinilian*. There are eight pattern sticks as well as the four set up for plain-weave ground. The pattern appears to be the famous *kinarkaryan ken banbantay*, or rivers and mountains, including man and horse on near borders.



6. Tinguian women spinning, right and back, and winding a warp with heddles in preparation for weaving on the backstrap loom. Cole negative #29155, "Spinning and measuring thread for the loom. Patok," 1907-8, Field Museum, Chicago.

7. Above, Cotton blankets being used while dancing the *tadek*. Cole negative #28679, The Field Museum.



8. Horse and man motif, Itneg blanket, cotton, red and black, #108888, Field Museum, Chicago.



9. Detail, *Inalsong* textile with "rice and mortar pattern," and showing stitched joining of panels, collection Rolando Go, Baguio, Abra.



10. Shaman performing a ritual involving the sacrifice of a pig, and a display of treasured family blankets to please the spirits. Some of the same patterns appear in the blankets Cole collected and are now in the Field Museum in Chicago. Cole Negative #29168; Album 1, "Medium making *diam* over *yhe* pig at Bakid Ceremony. Manabo", 1906-08.

and rice grain respectively. It is especially used by the priestess in after-harvest rituals.¹³ Another informant reports that it was worn during after-harvest rituals. It may have had multiple applications. This only points to the fact that textile culture is dynamic and changes with time, place and individual weaver.

Although the Tinguian did not bury their dead in treasured textiles as some of their neighbors did, their multicolored, figured blankets were important family heirlooms which were passed down through generations.

During rituals, the presiding medium, shaman, or spirit doctor was possessed by the *anito* spirits while in a trance state. The scene in Fig. 10 shows the setting for one such occasion, perhaps a healing ritual. The spirits regularly spoke through these specially trained mediums, *alopogan*,

who were often middle-aged women. Thus, the unseen but not unheard spirits were able to participate in important life-cycle rituals, healing, fertility, spirit propitiation, and magic-making along with the living human participants.

The Tinguian funerary setting in Fig. 11, like the event pictured in Fig. 10, featured a textile display in this case, mounted above the corpse. The number and quality of blankets on display were an indicator of the wealth and status of the deceased and his family.¹³ In other ceremonial contexts, such as healing of a family member, the blanket display performed a similar status function. The patterns, like the blankets themselves, were passed down through generations of weavers.¹⁴ The most valuable blankets were brought out of their storage chests only on special

occasions, most often to be displayed in ceremonies which connected the people to their belief in a parallel universe of the spirits.

During the funeral of an important man, "The corpse was richly laid out in all his best attire with gift offerings arranged around him. It was believed that he would symbolically take these possessions and textiles with him as gifts to his future home with the ancestors in Maglawa."¹⁵

The blankets were thought to also have had a protective function. Beneficial spirits were pleased by the display of beautiful blankets. While evil ones might be drawn to the occasion, they were prevented from doing harm because before doing so, they were compelled to count all the threads in the blankets, holes in the fishing nets, and hairs in the switches. By the time they had completed that task, the ceremony was probably over, and no harm had been done.¹⁶

In looking through all of Cole's Tinguian photo albums in the Field Museum, I only noted a few images of the figured blankets in use, and among these,

11. Field Museum negative #29171, "Funeral of Malakay at Patok. pl. Funeral Ceremony." Note the display of family textiles on the line above the corpse. This display declares that the family is wealthy and has many valuable ceremonial figured blankets as well as more utilitarian textiles for clothing and accessories.

only two were being worn by people (men). The clearest, and in my opinion most noteworthy photo is that of the handsome young warrior from Lagangilang, wrapped in a geometric figured *binakul* blanket, shown in Fig. 2.¹⁷

A photo of a blanket with the same pattern as the one worn by the warrior from Lagangilang appears in *The Tinguian* as plate #LXXIV (shown in Fig. 3). A similar or the same blanket is in the Cole collection at the Field Museum. Cole mentions in passing that valuable figured blankets such as this were "much in evidence" during the head-hunting treaty ceremonies between the Tinguian and their neighbors, and Aquino reaffirms this tradition through her interviews of modern Itneg weavers.¹⁹

Blanket Weaves

The geometric red, white, and dark blue blanket in Fig. 12 is cotton woven in the loom-controlled *binakul* technique. For this, a loom is set up with a warp of two colors, one light, one dark, which are threaded into the dents in the reed in pairs. The threads of the warp form two layers: dark on top and light on bottom. These are on two different shafts or heddle sticks, and are raised in alternating order during weaving. The pattern areas are arranged to form "blocks."





12. Detail showing front and back of cotton Tinguian blanket, Luzon. Rep weave. Warp, thin white thread and thicker blue-black thread, red stripes along borders and grid, no fringe, three panels, white embroidered joins, weft thin black/indigo, thick white hand spun. Early 1900s. Field Museum, Chicago, Catalog #108894.

The first block is threaded in light/dark order; at the second block, the threading order becomes dark/light until the next block begins, when it reverts to light/dark, and so forth across the warp. The weft threads are of two different thicknesses. The first is the lighter, thicker weft which shows up the pattern in a high ribbed effect, and the other is usually darker and creates a low filling row in which the pattern does not show. The color dominance changes from one side of the textile to the other, making a “reversible” fabric (Fig. 12). The pattern is identified by Aquino as the classic “Whirlwind” or “Whirlpool.”¹⁸

The blanket is composed of three narrow panels with neatly stitched joining seams. Typically each panel is about 22 inches across. The pattern is repeated three times across the width of the panel, with a red stripe on

each edge. The joined edges of the two panels are embroidered in a decorative motif in a thicker, contrasting thread. Our blanket also has embroidery all around its outside edges.

I first saw the Tinguian blankets in The Honolulu Academy of Fine Arts in 2003, and was fascinated with the geometric patterns of the *binakul* blankets—some of them seemingly producing optical illusions. There was something oddly familiar about those patterns. The *binakul* patterns were reminiscent of certain geometric block pattern profiles I am familiar with from my study of early American coverlets. I had met similar pattern layouts called “weaver’s profiles” in old weaver’s pattern books and manuscripts from the 1700s-1800s, and it is from this perspective that I attempted to understand the blanket structure.

The museum documentation of these blankets designated their weave structure as “double weave,” and the pattern as “summer and winter” because of the “reversible” color effect, but my weaver’s eyes could tell that it

was neither double weave nor the structure known as “summer and winter.” The warps were densely spaced and along the selvages, thin dark threads alternated with a heavier thicker light thread in a plain-weave structure. This could only be warp “rep,” or “rib” weave.

I was able to confirm this weave structure after spending several months in the Philippines, where I collected samples, and did an analysis with a weaver friend. By counting warp and weft threads and graphing their inter-lacements, we could determine that this was, indeed, a two-block rep weave. A full report of this analysis appears on my web page, <http://www.travlinweaver.com>

The method of designing with block pattern areas is a very old system, usually associated with the multi-shaft loom. How it came into use by a tribe of isolated headhunters in the mountains of Luzon is still a mystery.

Yushan Tsai is a professor in the Department of Textiles and Fashion Design at the Fu Jen Catholic University in Taipei. She is a master weaver trained in Paris, and teaches historic textile analysis. I asked her to help me analyze some of the Tinguian blanket patterns from the photo, using thread density data from the first sample I had analyzed. She has analyzed and graphed the blanket in Fig. 12, and her pattern draft and drawdown appears on page 23. Yushan says that she can never be sure of the weave structure she has analyzed until it has been tested on the loom. Fig. 13 shows her re-weaving of the blanket pattern we have been discussing, confirming it as two-block rep. We hope to go more deeply into our investigation of the weaving of Tinguian blankets by analyzing and re-weaving more samples.

13. Using the weaver’s draft on p. 23, Yushan Tsai warped her loom in Taipei and wove this sample of the pattern from blanket Cat. #108894 in the Field Museum. She says she can never trust that her analysis is correct unless she weaves a sample from it. Thus weaving traditions are preserved.



There is an interesting account of how one weaver from a different tribal group started a new weaving tradition in her area. “Since the Ibaloi did not weave, Isinai blankets imported into this area were not copied or assimilated into any previously existing tradition. Around 1940, however, in the Kankanay area, a weaver living near Kayan is known to have begun translating Isinai ikat motifs into the a laid-in technique after repairing a badly damaged Isinai burial blanket. Subsequently, she found a ready market for this textile in the area around Bugias, where it was highly valued and used as a funerary blanket.”²⁰

While the world of the Tinguian as Cole knew it has long since vanished, the beautiful blankets still speak to us across time and space. The old blankets are preserved in museums and among private antique textile collections, still providing delight to the beholder and possible inspiration to future weavers and textile artists.

Kathleen Forance Johnson has a master’s degree in art education from New York University and in her post graduate studies there specialized in Asian art history. In 1976 she went to India to live and teach for seven years and to Poland for eight years. She lived in Taiwan and in Thailand for three years each with her husband, the former US Ambassador to the Kingdom of Thailand, H.E. Darryl Norman Johnson. Her 30 years as a teacher of art and art education in various countries sharpened her perception and nurtured her curiosity about the arts in those places. Kathleen is a hands-on textile designer and weaver who finds inspiration in the textile traditions she studies. She is the founder of the Thai Textile Society, hosted by the Jim Thompson Center for Textiles and the Arts in Bangkok. She and her husband are now retired and reside in Seattle, WA. She writes articles for textile publications based on her experiences and research. Please see her web site for a selection of her articles. <http://www.travlinweaver.com>

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Notes

1. Fay Cooper-Cole, *The Tinguian, Social, Religious and Economic Life of a Philippine Tribe*, and Mable Cole Cook, *Savage Gentlemen*, 1929.

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2. Casal & Trota, Jose Regalado, Jr., 1981, p. 220.

3. Respicio, 2000, p.257.

4. Fay Cooper-Cole, 1922, p. 365.

5. Aquino 2005, p. 76.

6. Aquino, 2005, p. 117.

7. Tsai, 2010, p. 32.

Chen Chi-Lu, 1968, p. 100-110.

8. Respicio, 2000. p.127.

9. Lu, 1988, pp. 4-6.

10. Cole, 1922, p. 183.

11. Aquino, 2005, p. 240.

12. Aquino, 2005, p. 236.

13. Respicio, 2000, p. 403.

14. Aquino, 2005, p. 122.

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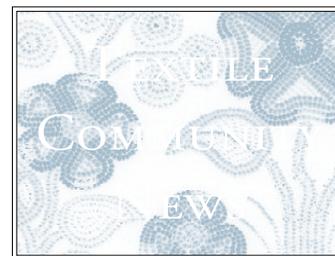
16. Cole, *The Tinguian*, 1923, p. 290.

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20. Casal and Trota, Jose Regalado, Jr. 1981, p. 224.



Fiberarts Ceases Publication

FIBERARTS MAGAZINE CEASED ITS 35-year coverage of art textiles and their makers with its Summer, 2011 issue. Started by Rob Pulleyn as a large-format tabloid in 1976, the magazine, with its mission "to promote all aspects of contemporary fiber art," made a significant contribution to sustaining the field. It will be greatly missed by the textile community.

The Textile Museum Affiliates with George Washington University

THE TEXTILE MUSEUM IS moving to George Washington University's Foggy Bottom Campus as part of a new, world-class museum scheduled to open in mid-2014.

Exhibitions and programs will be presented to the public in a custom-built, 35,000 sq. ft. museum building located at G and 21st Streets, bearing the names of both the Textile Museum and the George Washington University Museum. The new museum will include dedicated galleries for the Textile Museum, with increased exhibition space compared to its present facilities. Until the new museum opens, The Textile Museum will continue operating at its current location.

In addition to the new museum, the university announced that it will construct a 20,000-sq-ft. conservation and resource center on its Virginia Science and Technology Campus in Loudoun County, VA, for the study and care of the Textile Museum and the University's collections. This center will include storage facilities, a conservation laboratory and facilities for access to the collection.

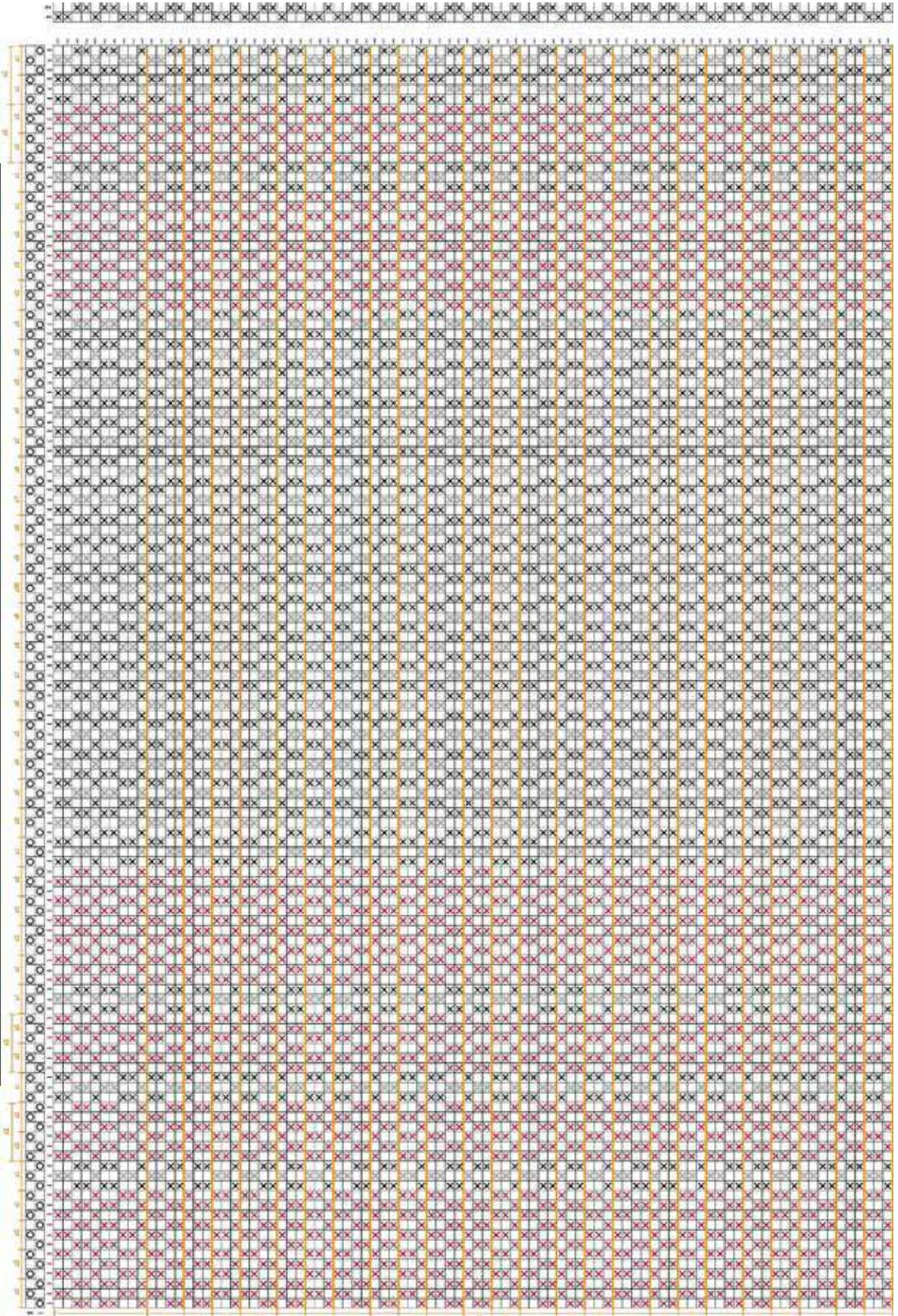
The affiliation with the university will allow the Textile Museum to expand its rich tradition of scholarship, education and fostering cultural understanding as it broadly integrates its activities into the far-reaching GWU academic community.

Tinguian Blanket Analysis (threading, treadling, and pattern draw-down)

by Yushan Tsai for the blanket shown on page 13.

Threading Order. The warp threads are arranged in a light/dark order.

Treading Order



Weave Drawdown