Traditional Weaving Methods Around the World: Looms and Techniques

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In one paragraph

Traditional weaving is cloth made on hand-worked looms whose build, techniques and patterns a community has passed down: a lengthwise warp is held taut, and a crosswise weft is passed through an opening in it, the shed, and beaten into place. Methods around the world differ in three ways. They differ in how the warp is held taut: by the weaver's body (backstrap loom), by stakes in the ground (ground loom), by hanging weights (warp-weighted loom) or by a fixed frame. They differ in how the shed is opened: by a shed rod and string heddles lifted by hand, by turning tablets, or by treadles worked with the feet. And they differ in how the pattern gets in: by dyeing the yarn before weaving (ikat), by inlaying extra weft only where a motif sits (jamdani, songket) or by weaving each colour area on its own (kilim, Navajo tapestry). The table below compares thirteen methods, from the backstrap loom to the pit looms of South Asia, the narrow-strip looms of kente and the two-person drawloom of Nanjing brocade, with the heritage listing each holds.

At a glance

Traditional weaving methods at a glance

Method	Loom, and how the warp is held	How the shed is opened	The cloth	Where	Heritage listing
Backstrap (loin) loom	Between a bar fixed to a wall or post and a bar at the weaver's waist; a strap round her back takes the strain	Heddle bar lifted by one hand, a bamboo bar pressed down by the other; a flat sword holds the shed and beats	Garment cloths, belts, dance dresses; nearly any weave	Northeast India; Japan; Guatemala (Maya)	Yūki-tsumugi silk, woven on a back-tension loom: UNESCO, 2010
Staked ground loom	Two beams pegged to the ground, the warp flat between them	Rods lifted by hand, as on the backstrap loom	Warp-faced plain weave (Al Sadu); belts and garments (Taquile); pile carpets (Fars)	Arabian Peninsula; Lake Titicaca, Peru; south-west Iran	Al Sadu: UNESCO, 2020, Qatar added 2025; Taquile, 2008; Fars, 2010
Warp-weighted loom	Upright; the warp hangs from a top beam, tied in bundles to loom weights	A heddle bar pulled against a fixed shed rod; the cloth grows downward from the top beam	Wool cloth	Ancient Greece and Europe; the Sámi of Norway and Finland into the 1950s	None
Navajo upright loom	A continuous warp between two beams on a two-post frame; the cloth is folded down and sewn to the fixed lower beam	Shed rod for one shed, string healds on a rod for the other, widened with a flat batten; four sheds for twills	Weft-faced wool blankets and rugs, alike on both faces	Navajo (Diné) Nation, US Southwest	None: the US is not party to UNESCO's 2003 Convention

Method	Loom, and how the warp is held	How the shed is opened	The cloth	Where	Heritage listing
Tapestry rug (kilim)	Upright or horizontal loom	Plain-weave sheds; each colour's weft turns back at its own edge, leaving slits where colours meet	Flat-woven rugs, the weft hiding the warp: 6 warp ends and about 26 picks per inch in one Turkish example	Turkey, the Caucasus, Central Asia	Wall carpets of Romania and Moldova, vertical or horizontal looms: UNESCO, 2016
Knotted pile carpet	The dar loom (Kashan); a horizontal frame on the ground (Fars)	Plain-weave ground with rows of knots tied onto the warp	Pile carpets; asymmetrical (Farsi) knot on cotton or silk in Kashan	Iran	Kashan, 2010; Fars, 2010
Pit loom	A frame on four posts fixed in the ground over a pit; warp beam behind, cloth beam in front	Treadles in the pit work the heddles; the hands throw the shuttle (or pull a fly-shuttle cord) and swing the sley to beat	Plain and patterned cloth; the fly-shuttle version weaves superfine yarn but not intricate extra-weft patterns	India, where the fly-shuttle pit loom is the commonest handloom outside Assam	India's Handlooms Act, 1985, can reserve articles for handlooms alone
Narrow-strip loom (kente)	A small horizontal loom with two or three sets of heddles	One pair of heddles weaves the plain ground; another set, threaded in groups, lifts the warp for the weft-faced pattern blocks	Strips about 10 cm wide, warp-striped, sewn edge to edge	Ghana (Asante and Ewe)	Kente: UNESCO, 2024
Floor treadle loom	A fixed frame with warp and cloth beams	Treadles (two on the Malay kek) lift the shafts	Songket, with gold or silver thread; Harris Tweed, wool woven at home	Malaysia; Outer Hebrides, Scotland	Songket, UNESCO, 2021; Harris Tweed Act 1993
Drawloom	A large loom worked by two people, one above, one weaving below	Pattern threads lifted from above while the weaver works the ground weave	Silk brocade with gold and peacock-feather yarn	Nanjing, China	UNESCO, 2009
Tablet (card) weaving	No frame: the warp is stretched between two fixed points	Each end passes through a hole in a tablet; turning the pack brings new threads to the top	Narrow bands of twisted warp cords	Viking-age Norway: 48 bands in the Oseberg burial of 834	None
Ikat	Any loom	Ordinary sheds; the pattern is tied and dyed into the yarn before weaving	Soft-edged motifs; in double ikat warp and weft must line up	India (Gujarat, Telangana); Japan; Indonesia	GI: Pochampally Ikat (2004), Patan Patola (2013)
Jamdani	Handloom	Ground sheds as usual; motifs made with discontinuous wefts that run only across each motif	Sheer cotton with woven-in motifs	Around Dhaka; Uppada, Andhra Pradesh	UNESCO, 2013; Uppada Jamdani Sarees GI (2009)

Key figures and their sources

- Impressions of plain-woven and twined cloth on small clay fragments from the Czech Republic date from the Gravettian, roughly 25,000 years ago (Soffer, Adovasio and Hyland, Current Anthropology, 2000; University of Illinois release).
  Source: University of Illinois release (sciencedaily.com)

- 22 of 1985), sections 2 and 3, text.
  Source: text (thc.nic.in)

Diagrams



Long threads stretched over sticks and separated by hand.
Photograph: mc, via Pexels.

Revision questions

The questions readers ask most, with the article's own answer.

What is traditional weaving?

Making cloth on hand- or foot-worked looms whose build, techniques and patterns a community has passed down, such as backstrap, ground, upright, pit and narrow-strip looms. The weaver holds the warp taut, opens a shed, passes the weft and beats it in, over and over.

What is used in weaving traditional cloth?

A loom: bars, stakes, posts or weights to hold the warp taut; a shed rod and heddles to part it; a sword or batten to open the shed and beat; and a shuttle or stick to carry the weft. Treadle looms add pedals.

What are the style, function and conventions of textile weaving?

Style is how the cloth looks: fibres, colours, motifs and structure. Function is what it is for, from clothing to dowry, ceremony and status.

Which weaving tradition ties the warp threads before dyeing?

Ikat. The yarn is tied in bundles and dyed so the pattern is in the threads before weaving.

What rug weaving traditions exist around the world?

Flat-woven tapestry rugs such as the kilims of Turkey, the Caucasus and Central Asia; Navajo rugs woven on an upright loom; the knotted pile carpets of Kashan and Fars in Iran; and the wall carpets of Romania and Moldova. The Iranian, Romanian and Moldovan traditions are on UNESCO’s Representative List.

Where did weaving originate?

No single place is known. Among the oldest evidence are impressions of woven cloth on clay fragments from the Czech Republic, about 25,000 years old.

Test yourself

Ten questions on this topic. Answer them without looking, then check on the last page.

1. What are the three motions every loom repeats?
2. How does India's Handlooms Act, 1985 define a handloom?
3. On a backstrap loom, how does the weaver set the warp tension?
4. How is the warp kept taut on a warp-weighted loom?
5. What kind of weave is Al Sadu?
6. By how much did the fly-shuttle pit loom raise output, according to IGNCA?
7. How many shafts do a plain weave and a 2/2 twill need?
8. How many tablet-woven bands were found in the Oseberg ship burial, and what is its date?
9. Why do ikat patterns have soft, blurred edges?
10. How are jamdani motifs made on the loom?

Answers

Each answer is stated in the article; the section to read again is named after it.

1. **Shedding, picking and beating.**
   See: What is traditional weaving?
2. **Any loom, other than power loom.**
   See: What is traditional weaving?
3. **A strap round her back takes the strain, and she braces her legs against an adjustable footrest.**
   See: Traditional looms around the world › Backstrap loom
4. **By loom weights tied to bundles of threads.**
   See: Traditional looms around the world › Warp-weighted loom
5. **A tight, durable, warp-faced plain weave made by Bedouin women.**
   See: Traditional looms around the world › Ground looms
6. **Three to four times.**
   See: Traditional looms around the world › Pit looms and floor treadle looms
7. **A plain weave needs 2 shafts; a 2/2 twill needs 4.**
   See: How a loom makes the shed
8. **48 bands; dated 834.**
   See: Traditional looms around the world › Tablet weaving
9. **The threads shift slightly as they are woven.**
   See: Traditional weaving techniques: how the pattern gets in › Ikat: the pattern is dyed into the yarn
10. **With discontinuous wefts, each running only across its own motif.**
    See: Traditional weaving techniques: how the pattern gets in › Extra weft: jamdani, songket and brocade

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