

# R | A | M

## **Collection Focus: Randall Darwall**

September 21, 2022 – January 7, 2023

*I'm trying to get people to realize that cloth can have that [life-guiding] kind of spiritual, emotional, and artistic content...If an artistic shawl or scarf 'fits into your everyday life,' then it has that kind of ability to spiritually elevate everyday life. —Randall Darwall*

Randall Darwall (1948–2017), a revered and beloved fiber artist, combined an early interest in painting with a poetic sensibility. He created one-of-a-kind textiles that were meant to be both worn and seen, somehow imbuing the threads with his own organic spirituality.

Darwall would interweave, metaphorically and literally, elements of an artistic vision with the everyday—bringing his interest in color and texture in line with his strong belief that what he made was activated in its function.

RAM has established a Darwall archive comprised of over 135 scarves, shawls, and garments. Dyed silk stands out as the material of choice, with metallic thread, wool, cashmere, and chenille on hand as well. As part of the archival supporting materials, RAM has been gifted textile works by other artists that served as inspiration for Darwall and ephemera that document his career. His work boosts the quantity of art to wear in RAM's holdings yet also dialogues with objects and images across media and types.

### **Career**

While he did not take up weaving until 1973—and did not operate full-time as a weaver until the 1980s—Darwall's connection to fiber began at an early age. He recounted a time from his youth before he knew "sewing was unacceptable for boys"—when he would spend hours sewing with scraps at a neighbor's house.

Darwall obtained a BA in Art History from Harvard University and a MA in Art Education from Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). It was while at RISD that he took courses in weaving and sparked a passion. He worked as an art teacher at Cambridge School in Weston, Massachusetts, for eight years, creating and exhibiting artwork until 1981, when he moved to Cape Cod to pursue weaving as a full-time career.

Videos that show Darwall talking about his work—such as those produced by Craft in America and included in their *Threads* episode—highlight how he was adept at walking through his ideas and his thoughts. He also shared these thoughts in workshops throughout his career—balancing traveling and running a business with teaching and going directly to his customer market at American Craft Council shows.

His work has been included in public collections such as the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, as well as Racine Art Museum and corporate private collections. Darwall was featured in pilot exhibitions such as *Art to Wear: New Handmade Clothing*, which debuted in 1983 at the Museum of Arts and Design, New York (then American Craft Museum), which then traveled across the United States and Asia.

# R|A|M

## **Process**

It is noted that Darwall's capacity to see depth was limited, yet he still gained an understanding of how color could create that dimension. Combining this with his early ambition to be a painter and his art history studies of Impressionists and Post-Impressionists, Darwall was able to begin using thread in a manner similar to how others would use paint.

Scarves and shawls from the 1970s and 1980s show Darwall experimenting with different types of weaving. He was producing double weaves, honeycombs, damasks, twills, and more—picking up on those and expanding his catalog of techniques as he moved along in his career.

Darwall relished the potential spontaneity of handweaving—the “unpredictable possibilities that a handweaver is free to explore in process.” He would remark that since he was not a machine that would be set up on a repeat pattern, he could work intuitively. By manipulating the color of the thread even before the weaving begins, Darwall encouraged variety.

## **Collaboration**

Sometimes, Darwall gave up some of the ownership of a singular project—he would choose the thread, dye it, and set up the warp while another weaver would create the weft. He seemed to be adept at this kind of arrangement which offered a plan but also further opportunities for variability.

In a holistic sense, one of his most significant partnerships was a collaboration with his husband and business partner, Brian Murphy. Together for twenty-three years, the couple enjoyed traveling and interacting with clients together, and by all accounts, running their business together. While Murphy managed the sales side of their endeavors, Darwall was dyeing and creating scarves, shawls, and the fabric that was used for garments. Both noted that a “collaborative community” both sustained and extended the possibilities for their business and vision.

To learn more about Darwall and see his artistic practice in action please visit Craft in America's website where they highlighted the weaver in the episode titled *Threads*, Courtesy of Craft in America:

<https://www.craftinamerica.org/short/randall-darwall-segment>

# R|A|M

Darwall—and the weavers that he worked with—utilized a variety of weaving techniques over the years. Some of those featured in RAM's collection include: eight harness block twill, 16 harness, collapse double, cut float, damask, double, eyelash, goose eye twill, honeycomb, macramé, slashed double, and summer and winter. A few basic techniques common to the field and Darwall's practice are highlighted below.

A **damask** weave's name is derived from where it originated in Damascus, Syria. This pattern is known for its intricate and reversible patterns.

A **double weave** is a method of weaving which uses twice as much thread as other types of weaving. Often this involves having double the warp threads and is woven with two shuttles rather than a single one.

Punch cards were created in France in the mid-1700s to control the action of a loom. In 1804–05, the Jacquard system of punch cards was developed, allowing the automatic production of intricate woven patterns. This resulted in the **Jacquard Loom**. Patterns could be stored on the cards and used repeatedly to produce the same product. Jacquard weaves are known for their complex woven-in designs such as brocades and damasks. To learn more about the Jacquard Loom and see one in action please visit: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x\\_ijnjx7Xys](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x_ijnjx7Xys)

A **honeycomb weave** is a type of weave where the cloth resembles honeycomb cells. This kind of weave is most often used for decorative fabrics.

A **shuttle** is a tool created to store a holder for the the weft yarn's thread when weaving with a loom. The shuttle is then passed left to right through the yarn threads of the warp in order for it to be woven in the weft.

**Twill** is an incredibly versatile type of fabric characterized by diagonal lines. This type of line is created by an offset in the warp threads. One of the reasons that twill is so popular is because it can be quite durable and will hide stains well. This weave is often found in jeans, furniture coverings, and more.

**Warp** is a series of yarns extended lengthwise (vertically) on a loom, forming the basis for a textile. **Weft** are the filling threads or yarns that run horizontally over and under the warp threads to build a crisscross network of yarns to form cloth. Below is a diagram to visually illustrate warp and weft.

