

Archie Brennan 1931-2019 - An Appreciation

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Archie Brennan died in USA on October 31, 2019. He had stood like a colossus astride the world of tapestry in Scotland in the 60s and 70s, leading a triple existence as Artistic Director of The Edinburgh Tapestry Co, Lecturer at Edinburgh College of Art (ECA), and tapestry designer and artist in his own right. The Dovecot under his direction developed into a centre of innovation with an international reputation, and a radically different approach from most other ateliers. This was entirely due to the crucial role he played as the proactive channel between the artist and the weavers, which led in a time of economic stringency to the production of a whole series of exciting and edgy tapestries, commissioned for public spaces.

The Dovecot staff was made up of a combination of apprentice and college trained weavers, with Archie standing with a foot in both camps, the man who managed to control and direct the contradictory factors into a dynamic mix. Archie's creative relationships with artists, particularly Eduardo Paolozzi, Harold Cohen and Tom Phillips broke new ground. Harold wrote later about his first visit when Archie took a tape from his pocket, measured the red block which ran across the top of his design, and said "That piece will be 14 feet, in the final tapestry, and about 14 inches deep. It will take one of my weavers six weeks to do, weaving the same solid colour every day. If you think he's going to be interested in your design by the time he's finished, you're mistaken." Harold said he could not imagine Leger having to bother about what the Aubusson weavers thought, but he realised that the remark was not so much a production strategy as a production principle; the basic belief that the tapestry must be a proper extension of the cartoon, with an identity of its own. This required the full commitment of the weavers. Harold paid fulsome praise to how this encounter

altered his whole approach to the collaboration between himself, Archie and the weavers, and to the high level of critical acclaim those tapestries received. Eduardo Paolozzi, too, trusted Archie's judgement to such an extent that he could pick the yarns and do a black and white design sketch, which was blown up to full scale in the studio. He let the Dovecot get on with the job, confident that what he wanted would be achieved.

On graduating in Stained Glass in 1963, Archie, as well as teaching First Year at ECA, was appointed Director of the Dovecot. I was also a student in Stained Glass, under Sax Shaw, who had been Artistic Director at the Dovecot during Archie's apprenticeship, and he suggested Tapestry for my second subject. In those days the fact there was no Tapestry Department was not a problem. An old loom was set up in the corridor outside the First Year studios, and Archie and Sax kept an eye on my progress. Others quickly joined me, a studio was found, and the Tapestry Department was launched. Archie was both creative and practical in his approach, with often brilliant utilitarian solutions



Archie Brennan (bottom row, middle) with Dovecot weavers, 1948, photo: Dovecot Studios.

to problems—using scaffolding and tensioning props for looms, when cost would otherwise have been prohibitive; limiting size; and conducting technical experiments. Cotton fishing line was substituted for woolen warp, cutting cost and introducing a more flexible material. Crucially the tradition of weaving from the back was abandoned, giving the weaver direct contact with the surface of the tapestry. Students were expected to be aware of the traditions but to work within their own cultural context, showing intellectual and aesthetic rigour. Their research, obsessions and individual influences were of paramount importance, building the personal archive everyone accumulated, and which Archie referred to as “contemporary archaeology.” Alongside this, we had Archie’s frequent nostrums, on how dangerously close “tapisserie” could be to “patisserie.”

Archie’s early work was principally about exploring the possibilities of the craft, particularly the relationships of warp, weft and texture, but by 1968 he radically reconsidered this. He looked back as well as forward, becoming increasingly aware of woven fabrics in medieval tapestries. This chimed, in an age of Pop and Op Art, with his fascination with weaving something already woven. He said, “To weave a real rug, a real mat, or a curtain, yet to add to it illusory aspects and additional illusory objects can create a setting with a special kind of reality, peculiar to tapestry.” A series of elaborate tapestry jokes, from “Mr. Adam’s Apple” to “Steak and Sausages,” succeeded because of his technical virtuosity and confidence. He delighted in the time and effort it

took to weave such a joke, which viewers enjoyed briefly and moved on.

After spending time in Australia, Archie went to teach in Papua New Guinea, and oversaw the decoration of the new Papua New Guinea Parliament. Then in 1984, on to Hawaii, later crossing America to New York, where he finally settled in 1993 to devote himself to his tapestry.

Humour continued in his work, just as subtle, just as amusing. Princess Di became the “Lady and the Unicorn,” He wove groups of tapestries on American themes like the couple from “American Gothic” and the “The Chairman of the Board” series.

Archie was heavily involved in the arts wherever he went. He taught all over the world, enthusing countless weavers, serving on many committees and supporting a multitude of projects. He was unstinting in his advice on the development of projects as varied as the setting up of the 57 Gallery in Edinburgh, and the Victorian Tapestry Workshop in Australia. He was Joint-Chairman of the British Craft Centre in London, and President of Scottish Society of Artists. He was awarded The Saltire Society Award in 1972, First Major Scottish Arts Council Award in 1974, and in 1975 a Creative Arts Fellowship at the Australian National University. In 1981 he received the OBE (Order of the British Empire) for services to the Arts. His work is in many public buildings and collections.



Archie Brennan, “American Gotham: At a Window XVI,” 216 cm x 91 cm, photo: Archie Brennan.