

My Uncle Archie (“who really knew a thing or two”)

Gordon Brennan

As a teenager I knew little of tapestry weaving, it was something that Archie was involved with. In my family of makers and doers, tapestry was just one of the things they did. School was difficult for me—I knew I liked art, but my experience of it in school left me cold. My father Jim (Archie’s brother), a sign-painter, encouraged me to speak to Archie. Visiting the Dovecot, I saw how Archie used text and words, and I made connections between my father’s and Archie’s craft. Weaving, like lettering, brought together form and space, surface and colour.

Leaving school at 16 and embarking on my seven-year apprenticeship at the Dovecot, my real education began. I liked how the team of weavers and Archie collaborated around the production of a tapestry. This single entity was created through collaboration between the artist and the weavers. The level of collaboration varied depending on the artist. For example, Eduardo Paolozzi provided the “cartoon” and some consideration of colour palette, but trusted the weavers and Archie to see this as a template that could be interpreted, giving the weaver freedom, a very generous act. Other artists were more specific, particularly if the cartoon was a painting, such as Robert Motherwell’s maquette painting after “Elegy to the Spanish Republic.”

Through Archie I learned about the qualities of linen or wool yarn as an interpretation of oil painting. I learned about opacity, transparency, definitions of white and black that were brought alive by surface, but I also learned how a painting is constructed. I became aware of the group effort of making the tapestry, watching Archie and the other weavers produce samples and hold discussions with artists and other weavers. I saw

the mutual respect and trust that was needed to bring the tapestry into being.

The relationship between the artist Tom Phillips, Archie, and the team of weavers was an example of successful collaborations, particularly in “After Benches.” The artist’s starting point was a section of a postcard of Battersea Park, via a painting. The tapestry became a record of transcription, from postcard through painting to a textile. Each weaver was responsible for different interpretations based on the relationship between colour printing, painting, and the structure of the “pixelized” nature of weaving. Part of the success of this work was dependent on Phillips’ initial painting process but it was also the way colour was optically mixed through strands of yarn. With this tapestry I was learning about colour, printing processes, systems, and bringing together different forms of interpretation to create an artwork that was more than the sum of its parts.

Phillips, the weavers, and Archie continued to work together producing such works as “Complete Colour Catalogue,” where yarn that was being used in other tapestries was woven into this work in quantities of coloured stripes dictated by the rolling of dice. I learned about how two colours met, about chance and order, visual diaries, collections, and time-based works.

As part of my apprenticeship I attended Edinburgh College of Art, taking evening classes in drawing, learning more about surface, form, observation, and colour. Archie would inspect my portfolio on a regular basis. He was a tough but supportive critic, encouraging me to be curious, to recognise and trust my abilities and knowledge. I witnessed Archie working with



“After Benches,” designed by Tom Phillips, woven at the Edinburgh Tapestry Company, 150 cm x 240 cm, 1973.

screen printing and sculpture, saw his sketchbooks, and noted how his interests in textiles, popular culture, ephemera, history, a sense of play, and collaboration fed his subject matter and ways of working.

Through Archie I was lucky to be introduced to the work of, and sometimes to meet, artists such as Paolozzi and Phillips but also David Hockney, Jean Dubuffet and a range of American artists such as Robert Motherwell, Louise Nevelson, and Helen Frankenthaler. Through weaving I learned that a painting is made of positive and negative layers added and subtracted. In contrast, tapestry is built; its surface, structure, content, and form come together at the same time.

Through discussion about tapestry, I learned about history, politics, music, poetry, literature, art history,

and the connectedness of visual languages. This was a proper education that helped me realise that I wanted to attend Art College as a full time student. Archie had supported and trusted me and here I was wanting to leave. I felt I was letting him, my fellow weavers, and my family down. I had to pluck up courage to tell Archie, but of course he could not have been more supportive. With a cheeky smile, he told me he knew this was going to happen. I had another stage in my education to come, one that would be built on the strong foundation that he and the other weavers generously supported me through.

Note: The title of Gordon Brennan’s article is a reference to a Brennan tapestry, “My Victorian Aunt, who really knew a thing or two.”