AMERICAN TAPESTRY ALLIANCE

The Emergence of Contemporary Tapestry: An Overview

by Linda Rees

Author's Note: *This document is the author's account of contemporary tapestry's history. I welcome additional perspectives and encourage others to submit their observations as auxiliary articles. There could be many opinions on several topics. My narrative is weak on events that might have shaped the growth of the number of tapestry enthusiasts on the east coast of the United States. Also, this history could benefit by having more material about contemporary tapestry in other countries. The content is not strictly chronological. Instead I have followed the development of various topics through time before returning to a linear progression.*

The Emergence of Contemporary Tapestry

Weaving was taught and practiced in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century, but it was primarily seen as a craft medium, especially useful for occupational therapy in the war years. During this time period skilled Native American weavers in the Southwestern states produced both Navajo and Hispanic Rio Grande Saltillo type tapestries. The weavings were popular as décor for summer cottages or in sun-rooms throughout the 20th century. I believe that familiarity with these finely woven weft-faced items had a subliminal role in how Americans defined tapestry in later years.

By 1950 European tapestry artists who had immigrated to the United States started teaching within the communities where they settled, introducing woven imagery as an option for artistic expression. Their teaching resulted in the slow spread of several different tapestry styles or techniques, varying according to the traditions of the countries in which these instructors had learned to weave. Thus the development of a growing community of tapestry artists has been characterized as a "grass roots" movement. Only a few university art departments offered weaving classes in 1965, but within a decade textile departments were an integral part of many university programs. Tapestry techniques would be one of many techniques introduced, but rarely a primary focus.

In France, during the 1950s, the art of tapestry experienced a dramatically different trajectory. A revival of French tapestry emerged, primarily promoted by Jean Lurçat, a respected artist throughout Europe. His passionate endeavors had a direct influence on the development of contemporary tapestry. Working with Aubusson studios, he reduced the cumbersome quantity of yarn colors developed in the 19th Century to about 30. This limitation sped up production and at the same time enhanced the qualities inherent in weaving. He believed that tapestry became "lively by strong values in juxtaposition, working by contrast." (Lurçat, 10)

The second way Lurçat affected the future of art weaving was by convincing avid art collectors, Alice and Pierre Pauli, to help establish biennial exhibitions of tapestries in their hometown of Lausanne, Switzerland. The first **Lausanne Biennale** took place in 1962. The exhibited artworks were selected by a committee within each country choosing to send work. The exhibition regulations required the entries to be at least 12 square meters. The exhibits were highly successful.

First Lausanne International Tapestry Biennial, 1962. Works by J. Owidzka, M. Abakanowicz and W. Sadley

In a fascinating commentary on the **Lausanne Biennale**, Giselle Eberhard Cotton writes, “The majority of works exhibited were made in the traditional manner, that is, designed by an artist but woven in professional workshops. The Polish artists were a notable exception because they carried out the weaving themselves.” (Cotton)

It was the Polish weavers whose work was to become so very pivotal to art weaving by the end of the 1960s. Much of Poland was destroyed during the war, leaving institutions such as weaving workshops in disarray. Even in the 1960s, art supplies were hard to obtain or too expensive and thus anyone interested in creating work in tapestry had to learn to improvise and to weave their work themselves. Fortunately, the medium had been taught as an aspect of art training so Polish artists had some awareness of tapestry processes. They started exploring new materials and methods of expression. Painters and sculptors saw the freedom of working in this new medium and learned how to manipulate whatever fibers were accessible, such as sisal.

This collective adaptation to new forms and materials turned out to be a huge catalyst for the appearance of what were considered quite shocking textile constructions at exhibitions in the 1970s. Threads freely suspended, coiled or in some manner formed into monumental sculptural forms, took over galleries. A worldwide shift in what was possible within the scope of creative expression was set in motion. It is fair to say that the 1970s was a decade where fiber art, or as it was termed in the Lausanne exhibits, “New Tapestry,” was on the cutting edge of art.

In the period from 1960 through the 1970s, North American tapestry weavers shared the Polish artists’ expectation that, for the most part, the designer was also the person producing the artwork. Almost all weavers in the United States explored elements of the new styles as part of their development. Many were trying to compete for commissions as the interest in using fiber art in public buildings increased. The number of options for learning various techniques had opened up through university outreach and community centers. More importantly, the number of local organizations and guilds increased dramatically and several magazines featuring fiber works became available. Exhibits included fiber art on a regular basis. While many weavers were stimulated to expand their interest to a variety of styles, there were also those who wanted to perfect more traditional means to create artistic imagery.

In Search of Refinement

The lack of training within a traditional workshop format in the U.S. meant that weavers who wanted to gain a better understanding of the basic techniques of tapestry had to seek out other resources. Books were of great importance. Two important books were published in England. Tadek Beutlick's *The Technique of Woven Tapestry* (1967) provided a clear description of the process, considerations about design and a variety of examples of what can be done in the medium. Peter Collingwood's *The Techniques of Rug Weaving* provided comprehensive documentation of very unique techniques and became the quintessential reference book on woven imagery. The accompanying photographs were tantalizing because many introduced ways to produce weft-faced patterns that could be used in tapestry. However, due to the interest in more experimental techniques, it was only after 1980 that books focusing on tapestry techniques became more common.

Nancy Harvey wrote two books, *The Guide to Successful Tapestry Weaving* (1980) and *Patterns for Tapestry Weaving: Projects and Techniques* (1984), that encouraged weavers who were not artists to try tapestry weaving. Many people in remote areas relied on her books as their first resource. Carol Russell's book *The Tapestry Handbook* (1990) included an impressive collection of images of work by contemporary tapestry artists. The opportunity to see contemporary tapestry was very valuable. Russell's book was republished in 2007, much revised and expanded, as *Tapestry Handbook: The Next Generation*. Several additional books have been produced about our medium since 2000; see the ATA website for a list of books.

The British Discipline

Archie Brennan, "Dersu Uzala: The Earth Awaits"

1996, 36" x 22"

In the early 1960s, Archie Brennan, from Scotland, was a major influence for tapestry weavers in many countries, although his influence in America was to come later. His training included a

seven year apprenticeship at Dovecot Studios in Edinburgh, Scotland, several years studying abroad and a degree from the Edinburgh College of Art. In 1962, he established and developed the Graduate and Post Graduate Department of Tapestry and Fibre Arts at the Edinburgh College of Art and in 1963 became Director of the Dovecot. By 1975 he was at the Australian National University where he concentrated on his own artwork. He also consulted in the establishment of the Victorian Tapestry Workshop in Melbourne. (See Anna Byrd Mays, in the introduction to an on-line exhibition featuring Brennan, which she curated, for more information.) Brennan has been living in the United States since 1984. His enthusiasm, tenacity and willingness to share his knowledge and opinions have touched tapestry artists around the world and he is now in his sixth decade of dedication to the medium.

Maureen Hodge served as Head of Tapestry at the Edinburgh College of Art from 1973-2006, after being a lecturer there since 1967. She taught most of the Scottish tapestry artists and many weavers from other countries. The department's goal for students, as stated on its website, was that "they were expected to be aware of past traditions but, more importantly, to work within their own cultural contemporary context. Teaching was almost always on a one-to-one basis. Open-mindedness and self-motivation, curiosity and intellectual endeavour were encouraged–indeed were mandatory. As far as possible, assumptions were to be questioned."

Joan Baxter, "Migdale Kilt," 2006, 80 x 212cms

West Dean Tapestry Studio, established as a commercial workshop in 1976, was a second institution in the U.K. offering training for tapestry artists. Its first project was a commission from the daughter of Henry Moore to produce a tapestry from one of his drawings. The project turned into a series of eight that were exhibited around the world in the next five years. Tapestries woven at West Dean are also on permanent view at the Henry Moore Foundation, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Surrey History Centre, Shipley Art Gallery, Gateshead and many other locations.

The West Dean Studio has continued to produce tapestries and in 2002 embarked on what has been termed, according to its website, “the biggest weaving project to be undertaken in Britain for two centuries,” The Mystic Hunt of the Unicorn tapestry series. “The designs are closely based on a set of Renaissance tapestries held at the Cloisters Museum in New York. These were woven in the Low Countries around 1500. The tapestry project (completed in June 2015) was managed by West Dean College in West Sussex. The weavers worked in two teams: one based at West Dean College; the other in a purpose-built studio in the Nether Bailey of Stirling Castle.” Weavers from several countries participated in this project. Read more about the Stirling tapestries.

The Stirling Tapestries. Woven by West Dean Tapestry Studio.

Influences in the late 1970s

In 1978 the exhibit, **22 Polish Textile Artists**, was on display at the Handweavers Guild of America (HGA) Convergence in Fort Collins, Colorado. It featured several large tapestries that were as imaginative as the work of Polish textile artists working in more experimental techniques. While the expressiveness and scale was remarkable, the work did not gain a big following in the United States. (Rees 2004, 132). Vancouver, B.C. artist Joanna Staniszkis did work in a manner that was referred to as "Polish style." It relied on using small lozenges of analogous colors while constructing the design. The resulting work was in keeping with the preference for covered warps while maintaining the expressive imagery of the Polish weavers. What was catching the attention of tapestry artists in the United States by 1980 were the more traditional methods used by French workshops. The strongest impetus for gaining these skills came from California where there were examples and resources to make the technical leap happen. In the catalog for the 1997 exhibition **The Fabric of Life: 150 Years of Northern California Fiber Art History**, Jan Janeiro discussed the progression of fiber as an art form in Northern California from 1939, when Dorothy Leibes organized the Decorative Arts Exhibitions as part of the Golden Gates Exposition, until 1965 (see Janeiro in list of works cited). Janeiro considers the first half of that time span to have been focused on the development of contemporary craft fabrics for commercial or home décor. She goes on to mention that by 1950 both Hal Painter and Ed Rossbach had located in the area after going back to school on the G.I. bill. They, along with Katherine Westphal, were the primary fiber artists to "…create the atmosphere which helped give birth to the second phase of the contemporary textile movement – Textile Art – the recognition that textiles no longer had to be utilitarian, functional, to serve as interior decoration." She summarizes, "By the end of the decade [1960s] an infrastructure in academia had been established: Ground-breaking artists had been identified, with their significant works serving as visual icons for the newly recognized field; the threads of historical connections were being mined, and an eclecticism of styles, expression and technique had been adopted." (Janeiro, 23)

Jean Pierre Larochette and Yael Lurie, “Harmony,” 1979, 78” x 52,” woven with the San Francisco Tapestry Workshop

Artist Mark Adams had learned the process of designing tapestry cartoons in France and brought his skill to the Bay Area by 1960. His early tapestries were woven in Aubusson, France, but by the late 1970s he worked with the San Francisco Tapestry Workshop. Several of his creations were exhibited in two one-person shows at San Francisco museums by 1961. He

developed a reputation for large colorful wall hangings. Also his tapestry “Great Wing” was in the first **Lausanne Biennale** in 1962.

Joyce Hulbert, in her article “Tapestry: The French Connection” for the same **Fabric of Life** catalog, described Mark Adams’ meeting with Jean Pierre Larochette and Yael Lurie. “Mark Adams’ visibility in the San Francisco art scene brought about a piece of synchronicity that continues to stimulate and inform the tapestry world of Northern California.” (Hulbert, 4) Larochette and Lurie had moved to the Bay Area in 1968 from Mexico City. He was born into a family of Aubusson weavers and she followed her artistic father’s path. Her skill in designing for weaving and his mastery of tapestry weaving techniques was a perfect match. Mark Adams suggested they meet Margery Livingston who was interested in French tapestry. She arranged for them to conduct summer workshops at San Francisco State University in the summers of 1973 and 1974. Livingston is quoted as saying that “there was a tremendous demand for tapestry…and the West Coast is the center. And so the timing was perfect.”

Mark Adams, "California Poppies," 1976, 54 ½ x 33 7/8 in

Anna Bennett, Curator of Textiles at the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum, was in the process of organizing an exhibit, **Five Centuries of Tapestry**, at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor Museum in 1976. She asked Jean Pierre to organize a demonstration of tapestry technique for the exhibit. "Mark Adams designed a cartoon that he felt would be simple but effective ('California Poppies') – something that could be done in six weeks. Miraculously, it all came off." (Hulbert, 4).

Once the tapestry was completed Jean Pierre and three of his students, Ernestine Bianchi, Phoebe McAfee, and Ruth Tanenbaum (Scheuer), established the San Francisco Tapestry Workshop (SFTW). Hulbert documents that "Over 300 artists worked or trained at the SFTW over the years [1977-1988] and many continue as professional artist/weavers today." She identifies Katherine Kilgore as one such artist. Kilgore was close to 50 when she learned ". . . the techniques of French tapestry. Her design process for tapestry became a mix of preliminary sketches and weaving improvisation focused by the new technique" (Hulbert, 4-5).

Hal Painter, an artist since the late 1940s, established a tapestry studio in Northern California in the 1960s after learning to weave in Mexico. He was an influential teacher in the area. He and his partner, Jim Brown, set up a tapestry workshop in a remote part of Oregon in the early 1970s for tapestry retreats and workshops. They decided to organize a 1976 Bicentennial Year tour, offering tapestry workshops throughout the country. It surprised them to discover that there were far more weavers wanting to gain greater skill in tapestry weaving than they had expected. Shelley Socolofsky, in a 2007 interview with Jim Brown mentions: "It was during this seminal trip that they crossed paths with the San Francisco Tapestry Workshop and merged ideas with Ruth Scheuer …and others." (Socolofsky, 2) Brown believed that "educating the public about tapestry was fundamental in establishing a marketplace open to purchase and commissioning of contemporary tapestry." He understood this challenge in 1982 when he and Hal Painter formed The American Tapestry Alliance (ATA). Mary Dietrich and Ruth Scheuer became their early advisors. (Dietrich, 3)

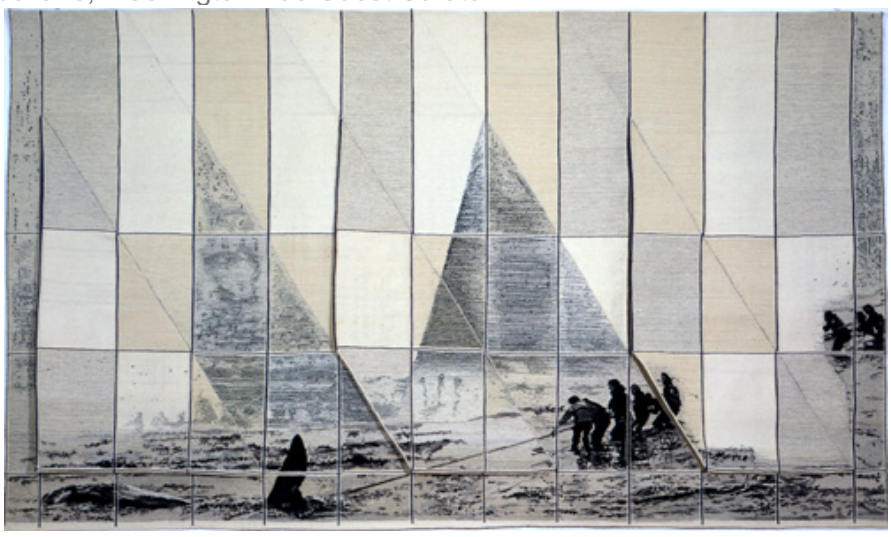
Ruth Dundas (formerly Scheuer) recounts her tapestry path, "In 1975, I moved to San Francisco from North Carolina to attend San Francisco State's Graduate School in Weaving and study with Candace Crockett. I completed the MFA program there in 1977 with a specialty in French Tapestry … An opportunity arose for me to become the first American student at the Gobelins

Tapestry Manufacture in Paris, formerly closed to foreigners and very secretive about their world-renowned technical expertise. I was able to study there because I had a background in French tapestry and spoke French, two requirements very difficult for most Americans to come by. I studied intensively at the Gobelins for eight months and then returned to San Francisco to share my knowledge. Realizing that 'high warp' and 'low warp' are two very different cultures, I decided to move to New York City to open my own collaborative studio. The Scheuer Tapestry Studio opened in 1982. I taught and worked with over 25 apprentices in the traditional Gobelins style, weaving collaboratively from my photographs, interpreted loosely during the weaving process. Over the ten years that we worked together, we wove over 80 tapestries for major artists, corporate and private clients, as well as created tapestries for exhibition in France, Germany, Poland, Japan, Australia, Great Britain, Canada and all over the United States. Our work was featured in many magazines, articles and international traveling exhibitions. The studio was converted to a fine art gallery in 1992 due to the financial crisis in the commission world." (Ruth Dundas, in comments submitted in September 2014 by Ruth Dundas and Mary Lane for this article.)

Scheuer Tapestry Studio, original location, 2 Cornelia Street, NYC, 1983.

Indeed, when discussing “French” tapestry techniques, there are two traditions, the primary difference being the structure of the looms used. The tapestry workshops in Aubusson use “low warp,” horizontal looms. In the Gobelins Manufactory, established by the French government in Paris during the 16th century to produce tapestries for the royalty and diplomatic gifts, the looms are upright (vertical), as were the ones constructed for Ruth. Both studio systems were reticent in sharing procedures they utilized. For contemporary tapestry artists the upright loom requires less space and offers greater ability to see work in progress. Both loom types, however, are very common.

Four years after its formation, ATA sponsored **Panorama of Tapestry**, a juried exhibit for North American tapestry artists held in conjunction with HGA’s Convergence in Toronto, Canada. The large tapestries, which hung high on the walls of an imposing hall, were exciting. For many, they were their first experience with such large tapestries. It also was the first exposure for U.S. tapestry artists to Marcel Marois, who was the invited artist from Canada. While he taught weaving and exhibited extensively in Quebec and abroad, he was not well known in the United States. **Panorama of Tapestry** provided a way for artists in both countries to connect and it generated a desire for even greater interaction. Marois also had work in a traveling exhibit **Tapestry: Contemporary Imagery/ Ancient Tradition: United States, Canada, United Kingdom**, where his tapestry “Tension Progress” was exhibited. While the exhibit featured 19 well known artists from the United States, Canada and United Kingdom, it only traveled to three galleries in northwestern states. Valerie Clausen, Cheney Cowles Memorial Museum Spokane, Washington was Guest Curator.



Marcel Marois, “Tension Progressive,” 1982, 72" x 124”

In 1988 the International Tapestry Symposium took place in Melbourne, Australia and tapestry artists from many countries attended. ATA organized an exhibit for the event called **World Tapestry Today** that was international in scope. The exhibit then traveled to Convergence in Chicago in 1988. This particular Convergence is cited by many weavers as a motive for shifting their weaving practice to tapestry or for elevating their work to a new level. Indeed the Chicago Convergence was full of very professional and creative artwork. Muriel Nezhnie, who had been the invited artist representing the U.S. in the previous ATA show, had a one person exhibition of her signature work, **Images of the Holocaust**. It featured six tapestries and one unframed painting, along with supporting material. She also was involved in ATA's publicity at the conference.

Muriel Nezhnie, "Liberation," 36" x 47"

Alternative Approaches

Around the same time, other opportunities arose for learning tapestry techniques and seeing exhibitions of contemporary tapestry. The majority of weavers were women and many became influential teachers and exhibiting artists. Women have also been the backbone of the organizations supporting the medium. During the 1980s, California and the Northwest coast, including British Columbia, were hot spots for tapestry weavers and tapestry exhibitions. By the end of the decade Jane Kidd, at the Alberta College of Art and Design in Calgary, was a major

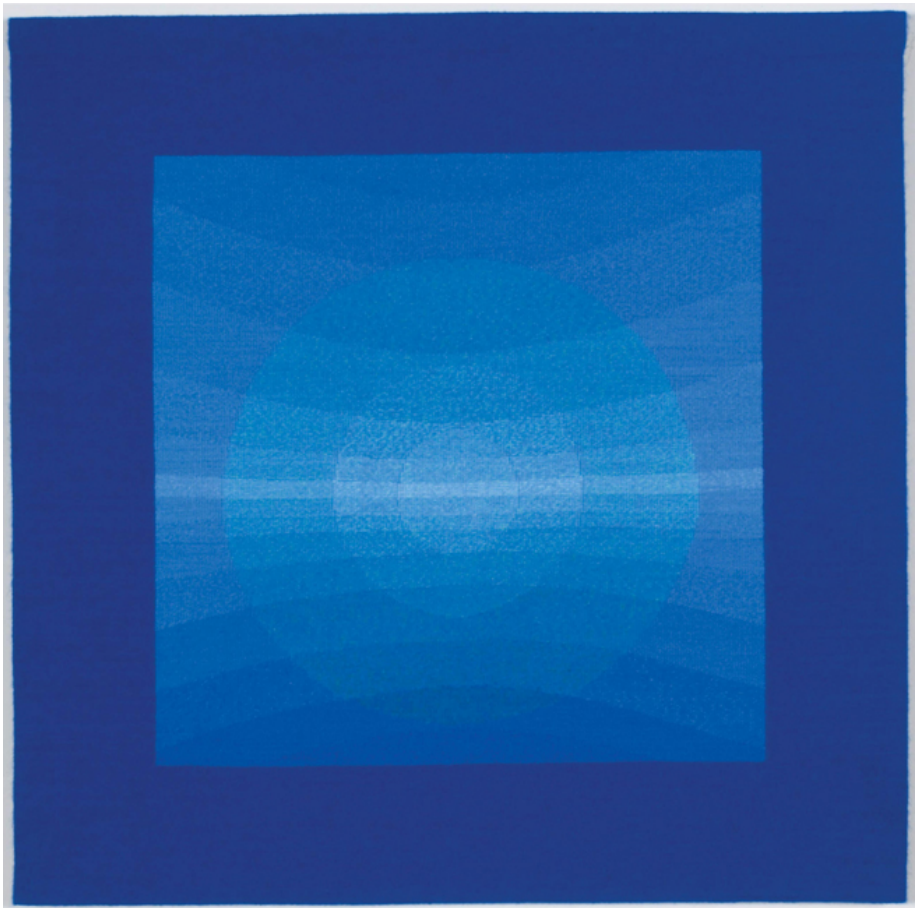
voice in the tapestry scene, as was Helga Berry in Alaska, who spearheaded ITNET (International Tapestry Network). Barbara Heller and Ruth Jones had high visibility with studios on Vancouver's Granville Island in British Columbia. The Oregon College of Art and Craft (then Oregon School of Arts and Crafts) was chaired during the 1980s by Layne Goldsmith, Michelle Maynard, David Johnson and John French. On the east coast, Susan Iverson was offering tapestry instruction in the fiber curriculum as professor in the School of the Arts, Department of Craft/Material Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. However for the most part, tapestry artists worked in relative isolation during the greater part of the 1980s.

Swiss artist Silvia Heyden had her first major U.S. exhibition in 1972 after moving to Durham, NC in 1966. Her prolific output of highly distinctive tapestries was based on a decision she made early in her career. She ascertained that she could achieve interesting imagery by using only the shapes that were most easily woven within the grid-structure of warp and weft, such as triangles, half-rounds and a technique she termed "feathered," which is also called "wedge weave," in reference to a technique used by Navajo weavers in the later part of the 19th century. In her book, *The Making of Modern Tapestry,* she comments: "The cross hatch sections. . . were woven in opposite directions to counterbalance the tension that was building up [in eccentric weaving] on the warp. I sensed that I was on the verge of unveiling a new technique specific to weaving . . . This experience in weaving Currents was one of the most memorable in my quest to establish tapestry as an independent art form." (Heyden, 53)

In New Mexico, Rachael Brown played an important role by establishing Weaving Southwest, a gallery where contemporary tapestry artists in the state could exhibit. She had opened a shop that supplied hand-dyed yarns in 1985 and then started the gallery two years later. Through requests to teach, she had connected with many tapestry weavers of the diverse cultures populating the state and for the first three years displayed the work of all of them. Sales for the Navajo weavers, however, were better at their traditional venues and the Hispanic weavers had formed a shop for their work called Tierra Wools. Nevertheless, Weaving Southwest established a format for selling tapestries and inspired many tapestry artists to use the rich colors achieved in hand-dyed yarn. Weaving Southwest is now run by Brown's granddaughter, Teresa Loveless, and is primarily a weaving supply store.

Several other tapestry teachers in the Southwest have been influential, for example Irvin Trujillo, whose ancestors settled in northern New Mexico in the late 1760s. He and his wife Lisa have continued a style of weaving that dates back generations. They have worked with many

weavers interested in the Rio Grande/Saltillo style, and have branched into more contemporary work as well. James Koehler, while living in Santa Fe, established a style that was timeless in its color movement, while contemporary in its abstract geometry. He was one of the most sought-after instructors for his control of color blending and disciplined exploration of what appears to be simple imagery, for example the sine wave.



James Koehler, ""Koan: Ensnared Light XI," 2006, 39.5" x 40"

Marlowe Katonay, "The Acquisition," 2014, 43.5" x 30"

Native American weavers in the Southwest have also been practicing traditional styles while introducing new formats and subject matter. Two exciting examples of artists who successfully interweave traditional motifs with contemporary imagery were featured in the ATA's Quarterly, *Tapestry Topics*, in 2015. Marlowe Katoney comments: "For me, being an artist is an ongoing pursuit of freedom. It is not having to abide by the popular terms of beauty or to create something readily identifiable as being "Navajo." Instead, I deconstruct old ideas to create new ones. As an artist I believe the capacity of the imagination is endless and the motions of daily life can be fuel for the imagination. It's through these ideals that I'm able to approach Navajo weaving with a fresh perspective." (American Tapestry Alliance, *Tapestry Topics*, Vol. 41 No. 2, p. 9-12)

Teotitlán del Valle native, Erasto “Tito” Mendoza states: “I have worked in different workshops of well-known weavers where I learned to weave intricate traditional rugs, designs from Mexican codices, and reproductions of paintings by famous Mexican artists. I also learned to weave with cotton and silk, to incorporate metallic threads, dye with natural pigments as well as aniline dyes, and weave geometric designs inspired by antique Saltillo serapes.. . . . Now I work independently, weaving and selling my own traditional-themed rugs and wall pieces . . . participating in events such as the Santa Fe International Folk Art Market in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and the World Art Market at the Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver, Canada.” (American Tapestry Alliance, *Tapestry Topics*, Vol. 41 No. 2, p. 17-20)

Erasto “Tito” Mendoza, “Encuentro,” 2013, 27” x 28”

Rose and Eugene Vigil have chosen another path as Rose relates: “In our work together, my husband and I are each fulfilling our dreams of keeping our traditions alive and passing our culture to our community. We do this through our joint efforts in completing our Rio Grande/Chimayo textiles. I feel that our traditional work leads to our culture, and that helps us find our identity in society. By learning how our ancestors worked many years ago, we implement our work, keep their traditions alive, and become culture bearers. This, in turn, helps

us understand our origins and ourselves." (American Tapestry Alliance, *Tapestry Topics*, Vol. 41 No. 2. P. 21-24)

Despite the production of exquisite examples of work from the three cultures of southwestern United States during the 1980s, we rarely saw these tapestries in juried or invitational exhibitions. It is hard to overstate the dominance of the French tapestry techniques during that period, and into the 1990s. Time-tested formulas for working with color or the use of a detailed cartoon, for example, had been missing components that enabled the aspiring artist's vision to connect with materials and tools needed to capture realistic imagery.

As the 1980s ended, Courtney Ann Shaw curated an exhibit, **American Tapestry Weaving Since the 1930s and Its European Roots**, as part of her dissertation in the Department of Art at the University of Maryland. An informative catalog published in 1989 included essays about the artists she selected and their resumes. Shaw's project is a rare example of research and commentary on both contemporary tapestry trends and the artists producing the work. (See Shaw in list of works cited.)

New Perspective in the 1990s

Weavers who had attended the 1988 Melbourne conference left Australia with a strong desire for greater connection to tapestry weavers around the world. The consensus was that another organization was needed to share articles about events and tapestry imagery from around the world. Helga Berry, who "had a solid web of contacts in the European tapestry community, a global perspective and a positive and energetic outlook on the future of traditional tapestry," founded the International Tapestry Network (ITNET) and became its president." ATA, at that time, was primarily committed to developing a network of North American artists, so ITNET served a valuable function by providing a wider context." (Marcus, 2)

Besides organizing exhibits with beautiful color catalogs, Berry and her volunteers produced quarterly newsletters with articles submitted by at least twenty world correspondents. "…For those of us in the United States who had little direct knowledge of our colleagues in far-flung places, the effect was exhilarating. . . As the ITNET Newsletter morphed into the ITNET Journal, and the editorship passed from Helga to subsequent editors, it also became an increasingly structured publication, with regular features, and a calendar of exhibitions, competitions, conferences/symposia and educational possibilities." (Marcus, 3)

Tapestry Forum, a group of weavers primarily based in the Portland, Oregon area, sponsored a symposium in 1990 to further promote the camaraderie experienced in Australia two years earlier. Artists attending that conference comprised the core of the newly established ITNET.
The second ITNET exhibit opened at the Anchorage Museum in Alaska. Besides commentary from the jurors, the exhibit's catalog (see Russell, Carol K. ed. in list of works cited) had twelve brief essays by artists and scholars from many countries. The show traveled to Vancouver, British Columbia in 1993 in conjunction with a symposium, Making a Place for Tapestry, sponsored by the British Columbia Society of Tapestry Artists (BCSTARS). The symposium attendees, and especially the exhibit participants, were an international group, introducing work from South America, Asia, Australia and many eastern European countries. Just as ATA founders, Jim Brown and Hal Painter, had connected North American tapestry artists, ITNET expanded the community worldwide.

Peter Horn, "Date Line," 150 x 196 cm

In 1993, Sharon Marcus became Editor of the ITNET Journal. During her leadership, she introduced a fascinating list of contemporary topics in themed editions until her workload escalated to the point that she passed the responsibility on to "a new team in Australia" in 1997. However, after creating a few issues, they realized that with widespread access to computers

and the rewards of color imagery, a printed journal would no longer be the best format for communicating.

ATA sponsored a third exhibit for the 1990 Convergence in San Jose, California called **American Tapestry Today**, but the energy of the tapestry community was shifting. The founders of ATA were less involved in the early years of the decade. As the online ATA History states, “For ten years Painter and Brown nurtured ATA, until Hal Painter’s failing health and eventual death slowed the organization to a near halt.” There were no ATA exhibits planned for 1992 or 1994. Fortunately, Jean Smelker and the committee organizing the 1994 Convergence in Minneapolis invited Marcel Marois to curate an exhibit, **Tapestry Visions**. By this time, many regional groups had been organized in North America. A few tapestry artists living in the southeastern part of the country came together to revitalize ATA and specifically to organize an exhibit for 1996. Its title, **American Tapestry Biennial I**, emphasized their intention to re-establish biennial exhibits. **ATB I** traveled to four venues.

Kathe Todd-Hooker, “Metamorphic Transmutatiion 7x7x7 to infinity,” 2014, 10” x 8”

Also in 1996, the first small format tapestry exhibit, **It's About Time**, was organized by Tapestry Forum, in conjunction with the Portland, Oregon HGA Convergence. The size requirement specified that tapestries could be no greater than 10″ x 10." For many years, Kathe Todd-Hooker had been advocating that the tapestry community honor small format tapestries by allowing them into exhibits. With the goal of displaying the potential for beautiful, skillfully woven imagery created in this restricted size, the exhibit was organized as a non-juried show. It was a major success, with entries from novices to highly acclaimed artists. It set in place a tradition of biennial exhibits with its tenth, highly popular, version in 2014. Currently the Unjuried Small Format Show is one of two small format exhibitions sponsored by ATA. The other one, **Small Tapestry International**, has a juried format and alternates with the continuing **American Tapestry Biennial**, which has no size restriction.

Archie Brennan, "Nereid Riding a Bull," 4" x 6"

New Century Challenges

ATA began to revamp its image to move the organization into the digital era. Anne McGinn and Joan Griffin, undoubtedly with the help of many others, spearheaded the task of redefining the structure of the organization and creating a website. The mammoth task became a reality in 2002.

Tapestry artists entered the 21st century disgruntled about the competition created by newly accessible computer-aided weaving options and other “quick” systems for producing artwork. Also, young artists were not attracted to tapestry. Surprisingly, at the same time that weaving seemed out of favor, fibers had become one of the two most popular majors for art students. Educators like Jane Kidd were witnessing an increase in students in fibers classes but those interested in tapestry had decreased notably. (Kidd, Jane, *Checking the Pulse: Reflecting on the ‘American Tapestry Biennial 4’ in an Expanded Field*. ATA Educational Articles) Computer savvy young artists expected speedy results and these emerging artists also questioned the notion that art must be made by hand. They embraced interdisciplinary input and appropriated imagery.

This changing perspective has become a motivating factor causing established weavers to question the traditional constraints about what techniques are appropriate for tapestry. It is plausible that the significant increase in membership in ATA during the first decade of the 21st century (from 200 members to over 600) occurred to some extent because the pressure to produce large work was lessened. Besides taking less time, small format work lends itself to experimenting and risk taking. In general, a wide spectrum of members has been sorting out ways to retain the classic elements that originally drew them to this labor-intensive process while challenging themselves to be more competitive in the broadening scope of fiber art. (Rees 2012)

Monique Lehman with some of the tapestries in the 911 Memorial Tapestry project, Riverside Convention Center, 2009.

Sometime in 2002, Monique Chmielewska Lehman decided to create a tapestry to honor those who were affected by the tragedy of September 11, 2001. She set up a website to solicit tapestry weavers to join in her 911 Memorial Tapestry project. Because her invitation was presented in several languages, she was able to include tapestry artists from around the world. Weavers were asked to create their designs in a 10" x 10" unit, or multiples of that. In Monique's words: "When I was watching the world falling apart on September 11, I started to think as a weaver and a woman, 'How can I repair what was done?' . . . On that tragic day, the focus of my life changed. I no longer saw value in decorating buildings and rich houses. I wanted to find all the weavers in the world to create an artwork together. The response was overwhelming. Eighty artists from Australia, Austria, Argentina, Bulgaria, Canada, England, Germany, Hungary, India, Italy, Japan, Lithuania, Mexico, Poland, Rumania, Slovenia and the United States are participating in the project."

The first exhibit, at the Kansas City Art Institute during the Surface Design Conference June 5-8, 2003, was organized as an array 20 feet long and six feet tall. Because the images could be mounted on black felt panels, the configuration was flexible and the project traveled to many venues in the United States and abroad. Early European venues included the **2003 Biennale Internazionale d'Arte Contemporanea** in Florence, Italy, in 2003-2004, and in Warsaw, Poland at the Art New Media Gallery and the Contemporary Museum of Art, and then during the **11th Triennial of Tapestry in Lodz** before returning to U.S. (see Lehman in list of works cited)

Common Progressions

Many countries began to revitalize their tapestry traditions during the years between 1960 and 2015 in a somewhat similar progression, incorporating their particular cultures and political dynamics. Australia forged a new opportunity for weavers to focus on tapestry, but many countries had major exhibits that changed the popularity of tapestry in the early 1980s and also at the turn of the century.

Australia

Tapestry in Australia has grown since the mid-1970s with the founding of the Australian Tapestry Workshop (ATW), formerly the Victorian Tapestry Workshop, in Melbourne. "The Workshop's philosophy has been to employ weavers trained as artists to enable close collaboration with the artists whose work they are interpreting." Other opportunities for learning and contact with tapestry weavers around the world arose with events such as the 1988 International Tapestry Symposium in Melbourne and a second symposium, Tapestry 2008, at the Australian National University in Canberra. Both events were widely successful, and provided a variety of exhibitions, as well as interactions with artists.

Another important contribution to the overall field was the introduction of a correspondence course, the Diploma of Visual Arts (Tapestry) at the South West Institute of Technical and Further Education (SWTAFE). Although as of this writing, it has been discontinued, the brochure for the course is still on line and describes the course thus: "it allows students to develop high-level practical, conceptual and interpretive skills. This course provides structured learning activities, but also encourages students to develop friendships and professional networks."

Canada

Canada has provided several opportunities for interaction among tapestry enthusiasts besides those already mentioned. Canadian Tapestry Network is a non-profit organization run by volunteers and publishes a newsletter with a Canadian slant to document, promote, and advertise individuals and events related to the art of woven tapestry. Their newsletter has had a large following for many years by artists in the U.S. and elsewhere. Many Canadian artists have also been active in ATA throughout the years, serving in many volunteer positions and through participation in exhibits.

Europe

The European Tapestry Forum was formed in 2001 to unite tapestry artists throughout Europe with a specific goal: "European Tapestry Forum is an organization of professional tapestry weavers which seeks to raise the profile of tapestry as an art form – and to provide a platform for tapestry artists. ETF wants to bring tapestry weavers together for collaboration and cooperation; exchange of ideas; learning and training." It appears that membership is determined from the artists who submit art work for their triennial **ARTAPESTRY** exhibitions and lasts until the next **ARTAPESTRY**. There is a minimal size of one square meter although some leniency is allowed by the jurors.

United Kingdom

As noted earlier in this commentary since the 1960s there have been opportunities in the British Isles for tapestry enthusiasts to gain skills. Currently "The British Tapestry Group promotes and explores the concept of woven tapestry as a contemporary art form. By raising public awareness through its exhibitions and regional activities, the BTG showcases the combination of craftsmanship and artistic inspiration which is translated into woven works. The British Tapestry Group welcomes professional UK and international tapestry weavers as well as supporting those who are starting on their weaving journey."

Hungary

In Hungary, an exhibition in 1980 called **Plus/minus Gobelin** represented "the end of the experimental textile art dominating the seventies and the new beginning of traditional wall tapestry." (This and the following quotations are from a curatorial introduction by Edit Andras to an exhibition in ATA's TEx@ATA online gallery; see link below.) Among the artists participating in that exhibit, Ildikó Dobrányi inspired this new generation of artists ". . .to carve out a path for the so called 'autonomous tapestry artists' . . . By uniting the role of the designer and the weaver

they followed in the footsteps of Noémi Ferenczy, [1890 –1957] the first Hungarian artist of this kind, and considered themselves her followers."

At the beginning of the new millennium an international exhibit called **Karpit** was organized by Miklós Mojzer, Director of the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest. He invited five jurors: Edit András and Tabor Wehner of Hungary, Caroline Boot from the Netherlands, Nöel Pasquier from France and Rebecca A.T. Stevens from the United States to co-curate the exhibit, which was held in 2001. A second **Karpit** exhibit occurred in 2005. These popular shows "didn't just bring the cream of the international contemporary tapestry art to the heart of Europe, they also removed the local and unknown Hungarian tapestry art from its isolation and anonymity, connecting the best local products of the genre to the mainstream currents worldwide."
A third iteration of **Karpit** is being planned. Read more about **Kárpit** on the ATA website: "In the Heart of Europe: Hungarian Tapestry Art."

In 2011 a unique project, Web of Europe, was organized by the Budapest-based Ildikó Dobrányi Foundation in conjunction with the Hungarian Cultural Institute in Brussels for the period of Hungary's presidency of the European Union. Marika Szaraz, a curator at the foundation, was impressed by an informative historical study by Emoke Laszlo (1939-2014), an art historian who wrote *Flemish and French Tapestries in Hungary*, featured in the catalogue of the second **Karpit** exhibition. Several classical tapestries had been on display in conjunction with that exhibit. She devised a plan to set up an interaction between a 17th century tapestry ("Mercury Hands Over the Infant Bacchus to the Nymphs") and 27 tapestry artists currently residing in the 27 member states of the European Union. Parts of the original tapestry were excerpted and woven reinterpretations by the contemporary artists were joined together, with the idea that long-term cooperation generated under the stimulating influence of joint work would serve to guarantee the survival of renewed European woven tapestry.

Tapestry by Aino Kajaniemi in the Web of Europe exhibit

In the section called "Maps" on the website for the project the 27 segments of the 17th century tapestry chosen to be virtually removed are shown. What is exciting, however, is to look at the section called "Paraphrases" that displays all the new parts. The artists' comments in the catalog make highly rewarding reading as they demonstrate that there are many very dedicated tapestry artists in the E.U. countries. (See Schulcz in list of works cited.)

Norway

In Norway there had been a long tradition of tapestry weaving, both conventional French techniques and also a tradition of folk-art tapestry. The latter relied on a geometric representation of religious subjects, especially the theme of the wise and foolish virgins. A new interest in weaving occurred in the early 20th century with weavers like Frida Hansen, who was considered one of the best weavers in Europe, and Hannah Ryggen who developed her own distinctive style of weaving without a cartoon or plan. Similar to patterns of influence in Hungary, Ryggen's free-form style became a resource for future Norwegian weavers. Another weaver of the same generation, Synnøve Anker Aurdal, is credited with introducing abstract imagery into the realm of weaving options for the burgeoning weavers of the 1960s and 1970s. The AbsoluteTapestry web site has several articles on historic and contemporary tapestry in Norway. An excerpt starts with the bold claim, "The 1970s – a colourful struggle" and it goes on to say, "Whereas the 1960s had been characterized by the search for materials and experimentation, the decade that followed had other concerns."

"Artist activism and the struggle to elevate tapestry to an equal status with other visual arts were characteristic of the 1970s in Norway. The textile artists won their battle, and in 1977 the Norske Tekstilkunstnere (the Association of Norwegian Textile Artists) was founded, a new organization that enjoyed the same status as other professional interest groups within the Norske Billedkunstneres Fagorganisasjon (the Association of Norwegian Visual Artists). In the association . . . women were in the majority." (From the AbsoluteTapestry essay, "Norwegian Tapestry History.)

In 2014 the "Office of Contemporary Art Norway" in Oslo organized an exhibit, **Unwoven World: Beyond the Pliable Plane**, featuring the work of three women, Sidsel Paaske, Elisabeth Haar, and Brit Fuglevaag, who in the 1970s "explored the domestic sphere and the everyday consumer object . . .in an intense quest to return to traditional crafts emphasizing the profound need to explore alternative modes, systems and media." The exhibit catalog,

found here, includes five essays related to the movement to establish the Association of Norwegian Textile Artists, Office for Contemporary Art Norway.

Peru

Peruvian artist, Maximo Laura has exploded onto the world stage for fiber art competitions in recent years, as documented in a comprehensive interview on the World of Threads Festival website from the 2012 festival's exhibition **Myth Making** in Oakville, Ontario.

Maximo Laura, "Inner Cosmos," 122 x 217 cm

His unique style, which incorporates a variety of covered warp techniques, and the vivid array of colors and imaginative imagery he creates, command a presence in cultures worldwide. As he comments in the interview, his ability to produce and exhibit as actively as he does is due to his workshop that provides work for many neighbors and relatives. "It is the mural that perpetually attracts my attention, as well as the development of sculptural and constructive artworks. I believe I am very lucky to have taken this path with weaving. I am very fortunate where my goals have always been exceeded by what I was looking for, and for that I am thankful for the life I have lived. Also, I am fortunate to live side by side with talented and creative personal assistants in my workshop."

Maximo Laura's biography, as delineated in the interview, shows not only how many opportunities this artist has taken advantage of, but also the fact that the tapestry medium does have a variety of venues for exposure and that it can hold a place in major art exhibitions. It also gives reason for optimism and could serve as a wake-up call regarding the commonly held opinion that our field is not appreciated. Opportunities, and competition, have emerged in many parts of the world.

Here in the 21st century, there is a swelling of interest in fiber art. This new enthusiasm encompasses a wider selection of materials and techniques than weavers employed in the previous century. Our medium has matured over the last 65 years and benefited from the efforts of many dedicated practitioners and contemporary tapestry organizations. It is time to increase our visibility through the continued presence of exciting tapestry in "all media" exhibits. I applaud the opportunities for critical writing such as in ATA's exhibition catalogs, Educational Articles and the TEx@ATA exhibitions, in addition to the wide variety of material consulted for this overview. I hope more writers take on the task of communicating about contemporary tapestry so that it will reach an even broader audience.

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From Linda Rees, who has been weaving for fifty years: “The process of creating a tapestry and interacting with a community of artists rewards me immensely. I spent many years in the 1970s and 1980s volunteering once a week at the local History and Art Museum in Bellingham, Washington, cataloging accessions. I discovered that I really liked descriptive writing. The practice served me well when I edited ***Tapestry Topics*** *and with other writing. As I am reaching the end of my career, I decided to contribute my part to document the history of contemporary tapestry. I hope other tapestry artists will contribute their viewpoint as well.”*