AMERICAN TAPESTRY ALLIANCE

Fiber Arts and Tapestry: 1960 to 1986 in the United States

by Christine Laffer

First Developments

The early phases of fiber art spring from the post-war period of the mid-1940s during a resurgence of interest in architectural and design innovations that people believed would make a new and better life for everyone.[i] Spurred by ideas based in the prior Arts and Crafts movement,[ii] artists sought to merge beauty and utility through a deep understanding of materials, color, and spatial elements. In that process, their efforts broke through many barriers separating previously exclusive categories such as art and decorative art. Specifically, a new emphasis on creating bold abstract forms when working with any material made it possible for woven and manipulated textiles to be seen as art.

Seminal textile exhibitions mark the 1960s: Lenore Tawney's first solo show at the Staten Island Museum in 1961; the first Lausanne International Tapestry Biennial in 1962; "Woven Forms" at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts in 1963; and "Wall Hangings" at the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1969, to mention just a few key shows. Two years later in 1971, Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago founded the Feminist Art program at the California Institute of the Arts. In those few short years, artists took to appropriating craft-based techniques commonly associated with women's work, such as weaving, stitching, quilting, knitting, découpage, china painting, in order to challenge the status quo. "Womanhouse" opened in Los Angeles, California in 1972, the same year that the Renwick Gallery, a branch of the Smithsonian dedicated to collecting decorative arts and contemporary craft, opened in Washington, D.C. In addition, that year marked the first national Convergence hosted by the Handweavers Guild of America (HGA) and held in Detroit, Michigan, and Pacific Basin School of Textile Arts started offering classes in Berkeley, California.

Herman Scholten, "Yellow Braid," 1969

Both sides of the art equation were put into question between Lenore Tawney's large abstract works in "Woven Forms," expressions of an artist mastering her primary medium which happened to be fiber, and Miriam Schapiro's *femmages* of collaged, commercially printed fabrics coming from a painter who switched to these "non-art" materials due to deep political concerns. Ready to engage questions of fiber's materials and range of content, Mildred Constantine and Jack Lenor Larsen published their first book collaboration, "Beyond Craft: The Art Fabric," in 1973.

Where did tapestry stand as fiber arts reached this threshold? On the one hand, woven tapestry remained the main reference point for a method of satisfying the expectations of commissioned textile wall hangings, as evidenced by Lenore Tawney's 1960 piece "Nativity in Nature" for the Interchurch Center in New York City. On the other, Constantine and Larsen's proposed term "Art Fabric" arrived by declaring itself separate from tapestry:

"A revolution in the last five decades has liberated the Art Fabric from the tapestry tradition. To understand the nature of the revolution and the evolution that followed it, to arrive at the present summit that the Art Fabric represents, we must consider the significance of particular earlier events, prophetic and searching." (Beyond Craft: The Art Fabric, 11)

Urszula Plewka-Schmidt, "Circle," 1975, 7th Lausanne Biennial

The authors traced a lineage in their introductory essay that began with the Arts and Crafts movements in England and Europe, followed by Art Nouveau and the Modern Style through to the Bauhaus, then to Black Mountain College and the Cranbrook Academy of Art. Even after mentioning that "the first fabrics produced in the Bauhaus weaving workshop had been 'pictorial weavings' or tapestries woven under the influence of painter Paul Klee" (Beyond Craft: The Art Fabric, 17), they saw more importance in the influence of Walter Gropius as Anni Albers, Otti Berger, and Gunta Stölzl began to produce "wall hangings of tremendous beauty." Enthusiasm lay with these new Art Fabrics because they brought about a freedom of expression unbounded by old craft traditions.

The Fiber Art Surge 1975-1986

As awareness of this new engagement with fibers continued to spread, a publication called *Fiberarts* began circulation in 1975. *Fiberarts* articles and images of new works, even published in black and white, along with *Shuttle Spindle & Dyepot,* which had started distribution to members of HGA just a few years earlier in 1969, evidenced the persistence of the fiber art movement in the U.S. In an interview with this author in 1993, Margery Livingston, professor of textiles at San Francisco State University from 1949 to 1985, remembered the rising influx of students, although the period she referred to was unclear:

“[W]hile I still had Weaver’s Alley I started teaching one class and then more at San Francisco State and then started a weaving department there. And people would beat the doors down to get into weaving classes. You know, it was simply amazing. I mean, I can remember to this day the tears of students who couldn’t get into the class.”

In response to the need for more classes, Candace Crockett joined the faculty at SFSU in 1974 as the program expanded. That same year Livingston invited Jean Pierre Larochette to teach during the summer session and during the three years that he taught there all of his classes were completely filled (The Tree of Lives, 230).

Muriel Nezhnie, “Portrait of Dr. Richard Ferry,” 24” x 26,” 1978

With the arrival of Larochette the tapestry traditions of southern France returned to the U.S. after an absence of over forty years when the Edgewater Looms atelier run by Lorentz Kleiser closed in 1933. A number of students found themselves drawn to the labor-intensive demands of tapestry even while tackling a diverse range of fiber art techniques. The method rewarded them with a satisfying level of detail and color relationships directly coupled to image-making. The differences must have been striking. Instead of trying to find meaning in the freedom of off-loom constructions and textured abstract structures, they found a different way of connecting personal experience to art at the crossroads of fiber and image.

The number of teaching centers that offered textile instruction just in the San Francisco Bay Area in the mid-1970s gives but one indication of the volume of activity going on in the U.S., let alone developments in other parts of the world. Gyongy Laky had established Fiberworks Center for the Textile Arts, located in Berkeley, in 1973. The California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland hired Nance O'Banion in 1974 and Lia Cook in 1976 as professors to teach their textile programs. These artists were not only teaching, they also made large scale pieces for exhibitions. The Allrich Gallery opened in 1974 offering one of the first viewing spaces for contemporary fiber arts, along with the well-known Annenberg Gallery.

Two highly respected exhibitions took place in San Francisco within three years of each other. The first, "Five Centuries of Tapestry," organized by Anna G. Bennett, gave a definitive overview of the tapestries in the collection of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco when it opened in 1976. The focus centered on a progression from historic works, beginning with a panel of the "The Apocalypse" dated ca.1380, designed by Hennequin de Bruges and woven under the direction of Nicolas Bataille, through to a modern work "The Spirit of France," dated 1943, designed by Jean Lurçat and woven in the atelier of Mme Goubély. The accompanying catalog and symposium were scholarly documentations aimed at recognizing and establishing the historic value of the collection. During final preparations for this show, Bennett invited Larochette to demonstrate traditional tapestry methods at the museum by weaving a specially commissioned design from Mark Adams, an artist known for his tapestries usually woven by ateliers in Aubusson. Students from SFSU had acquired enough understanding of these methods that they enthusiastically volunteered to assist. Out of their shared interactions grew the San Francisco Tapestry Workshop (SFTW) founded in 1977.

Judy Chicago, "Dinner Party Banner," 60" x 3," 1977

Woven by the San Francisco Tapestry Workshop

The second exhibition, "The Dinner Party," opened in 1979 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. It consisted of a large installation of three very long dining tables arranged in an equilateral triangle, with an open center and place settings for the heroes of women's history. The piece incorporated the handwork of hundreds of volunteers, many of them making the embroidered cloths on which the heavy china-painted plates rested. Chicago commissioned six tapestry banners in 1977, woven at the newly formed SFTW, to mark the entry to the main room.

Consider the differences between these two shows and their effects on graduating students. The shows displayed clearly opposing artistic motivations and yet both exhibitions had immense success, achieved extensive publicity and reached large audiences. The polar ends of the fiber art spectrum were represented, from historical tapestry to contemporary controversial art, existing simultaneously without apparent contradiction. Tapestry methods and effects occupied valid positions in both shows and made valuable contributions, contradicting Constantine and Larsen's earlier views that tapestry was a tradition to leave behind.

Judy Chicago had no real interest in fiber art per se, particularly not the kind that went off-loom and was abstract. She used the beauty of traditional crafts to subvert the political nature of a dominant historic narrative that had excluded women. In fact, the skill and level of detail was a necessary component to underscore the reverence her project invoked. This is in marked contrast to concurrent changes in the Lausanne Biennials where interest in fiber art expanded rapidly to the point that tapestry and craftsmanship had only a minor presence, replaced by an aesthetic that favored large visceral works. At the 1978 “Symposium on Contemporary Textile Art” sponsored by Fiberworks, the invited speakers were Sheila Hicks and Magdalena Abakanowicz — both artists whose works had great influence and set benchmarks for fiber art. By 1981 Constantine and Larsen had prepared their next influential book for publication, “The Art Fabric: Mainstream.” An exhibition opened that same year at the Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, featuring many of the pieces spotlighted in their book. Instead of separating fiber art from traditional tapestry, this time they make the ambitious move of separating fiber art from craft.

“Craft is mastery of material and technique to produce an object by hand; add to these skills the intention and imagination of the maker. If the beholder is drawn into the world of the maker’s values, sharing the vitality, intensity, and mystery, he may recognize the essential elements emanating from a work that goes ‘beyond craft’. Only then does he sense that *the distinction between the crafts maker and the true artist is precisely that the former knows what he can do and the latter pursues the unknown.*” (The Art Fabric: Mainstream 8)

Urszula Plewka-Schmidt, “Canons of Beauty: Madonna from Krużlowa,” 1979

Despite the romanticism loaded into the last phrase, fiber artists benefited immensely from seeing the breadth of experimentation included in the book, along with a critical assessment of multiple approaches to the mastery of making. The book displayed Ed Rossbach's "Basket" (1974), Neda Al-Hilali's "Atlantis" (1976), Lia Cook's "Space Continuum" (1976), Barbara Shawcroft's "Legs" (1978), commissioned by the BART Art Council for the Embarcadero station (removed in 2014), Claire Zeisler's installations from her retrospective at the Art Institute of Chicago (1979), Helena Hernmarck's "Blue Bonnet" and "Poppies" (1979), both commissions, Anne Wilson's "Incline" (1979), and so on. If you picked any page you would find a piece that resonated with textile sensibilities. Having watched the development of a support system for fiber art, Constantine and Larsen could include a chapter that analyzed the economics that kept the movement productive. Private collectors and even museums acquired works through galleries like Allrich Gallery in San Francisco, but the most important source of income came in the form of commissions. Architects and interior designers who met with free-lance art representatives or worked directly with artists sought these large textural experiences. From hotels to city halls, office lobbies and corporate meeting rooms, clients purchased wall pieces and ceiling installations.

It appears that the commission process began to avoid purchases of extremely experimental techniques and, as a result, gave a slight advantage to flat-woven works similar to tapestry. This may have been due to installation problems, which frequently arose, as noted by Constantine and Larsen:

"Too often, and particularly in lobbies, work is installed without adequate protection. Means of keeping people away from the work are all too infrequently employed. Adequate maintenance and conservation are virtually non-existent. There are certainly instances for types of work that should be screened by glass or hung over a dais or other horizontal surface that would keep people away. Still too little is known about cleaning and restoration. Of course, Art Fabric is only one among the new media endangered by placement in public spaces. But the problems point up the success and durability of gobelin tapestry, which is relatively impervious to handling, and can be cleaned, rolled, and easily stored or shipped." (The Art Fabric: Mainstream 204)

Michelle Lester, "Canyon Break"

Fiber art pieces of the 70s had run into issues of this kind. Apparently those who commissioned fiber works for public spaces hesitated to seal them under glass since that would not only be costly but would also deprive them of the air and light that animated their surfaces. One solution involved hanging the commissioned works high above the heads of viewers, creating a different problem: poor visibility which in turn reduced their impact. Another solution would have been to commission fiber art with smoother surfaces, as suggested by Constantine and Larsen. As commissions for public art continued to multiply, with many U.S. cities having initiated percent-for-art programs, these factors would have affected the interest in fiber art for public spaces during the 1980s.[iii]

Inspired by the successful exhibitions of 1976-78 in San Francisco and witnessing the rise of the SFTW, Ruth Scheuer moved to New York City and founded the Scheuer Tapestry Studio (STS) in 1982. This proved challenging as it required setting up a program to train apprentices while developing marketing that would attract commissions and sales. Another tapestry artist, Michelle Lester, had already established a studio in New York and completed many corporate commissions based on her own designs. Well connected, she was known for her verve with watercolor and occasionally free-lanced "as a textile designer and illustrator doing work for Jack Lenor Larsen and the fashion designer Nicole Miller, among others." (Nell Znamierowski in ATA Winter Newsletter 2003 v29n1 p.25) Scheuer preferred forming a studio team to work collaboratively from her photographic sources. They often manipulated the layers of color, figure, and reflections to develop images with a postmodern twist. The studio managed to secure a reasonable number of commissions and produced early speculative pieces exhibited in "From American Looms" at the New Jersey State Museum, Trenton, New Jersey in 1985

Scheuer Tapestry Studio, "Taxis: Urban Chase," 1985, woven by Beverly Godfrey, Deborah Hildreth, Susan Martin Maffei, and Ruth Dundas, (previously Scheuer)

Not only were several studios suddenly operating in the U.S. that focused on tapestry, such as the SFTW, STS, and Michelle Lester, but also a surprising number of individual artist-weavers. Hal Painter and Jim Brown confirmed this during an extensive road trip that criss-crossed the U.S., Mexico and Canada in 1976-77. By 1982 they decided to found a national organization, American Tapestry Alliance, to share information, initiate symposia, encourage collectors, and organize exhibitions. Their first efforts went on view in "Panorama of Tapestry" which opened in Toronto, Canada in conjunction with HGA's Convergence in 1986. The show included a significant number of mostly young artists that became well known for developing distinctive approaches to tapestry, including Barbara Heller, Victor Jacoby, Jane Kidd, Sharon Marcus, Marcel Marois, Julia Mitchell, and Muriel Nezhnie.

Another benchmark exhibition opened at the Cheney Cowles Museum in Spokane, Washington: "Tapestry: Contemporary Imagery / Ancient Tradition," curated by Valerie Clausen. It provided documentation of artistic process and listed exhibitions and collections for each artist. Significantly, it also mixed works by large ateliers (West Dean Tapestry Studio), artists who designed but did not weave tapestry (Mark Adams), artists who wove their own imagery, and the work of the only éditeur in the U.S., Gloria F. Ross.[iv] The show brought together perspectives of three countries: Canada, U.S. and U.K. International efforts such as this added significantly to the understanding of contemporary post-war tapestry in the U.S., as tapestry artists gained familiarity with recently developing ideas and methods in other parts of the world.

The years 1985 and 1986 seem to indicate a turning point, as marked by the closure of the San Francisco Tapestry Workshop in 1985, although this was followed by the formation of the Larochette Studios privately in Berkeley. The Pacific Basin School of Textile Arts closed in 1986, followed in 1987 by a similar end to Fiberworks Center for Textile Arts. These changes

suggest that instability began to appear in the fiber art support system, a topic that has seen little subsequent study or analysis. Some unanswered questions involve inadequately understood market mechanisms that in some way turned against the medium. As fiber art continued to develop and diversify it did not succeed in overcoming early impressions of poor quality and maintenance, impressions which may have converted to prejudices against the medium. Further, artists could not produce enough quality work to meet the peak demand of the early 1980s.[v] If demand began to diminish due to a combination of prejudice in the public commission market and lack of adequate supply of desired quality in the private speculative market, it would have triggered a slow decline in the number of galleries willing to carry fiber art. This plateau would translate into a relatively large loss for fiber when looked at from the perspective of continued growth in the art market overall. Finally, changes in taste, along the lines of postmodernism's pluralities and a fascination with a display of excessive spending, magnified by art's increasingly important role as a mechanism for investment, led to an abandonment of craft sensibilities.[vi]

Ann Newdigate Mills, "Nomad Trying to Capture Happiness," 49" x 88," 1985

Tapestry Momentum

Despite hints of market changes, tapestry as a medium continued to expand during the late 1980s, marked not only by the number of artist weavers, but also by international exhibitions and symposia. At the same time, fiber art began segmenting into a multiplicity of techniques – complex weaves, ikat, painted warp, and unusual material discoveries that departed from its brash, avant garde, and more sculptural modes of the 1970s. Innovations both subtle and bold across the textile field marked a new level of sophistication that energized the long-standing

conversation between tapestry and fiber art. Among tapestry artists there was still a belief that they had time enough to develop their work.

Notes

[i] The source of this resurgence came primarily from the Bauhaus school and the influence of architect Walter Gropius, its director from 1919 to 1933. Based on uniting art and technology in new forms of industrial design, it reshaped both hand-made and mass-manufactured objects, from architectural designs for buildings to ceramics, textiles, and furniture. These ideas were scattered around the world after the Nazi regime forced its closure and caused most of its important instructors to emigrate. See Koplos & Metcalf 2010, p150.

[ii] Peter Dormer included an excellent discussion of these links in his essay "The History of Craft," published in "The Culture of Craft" (Ed. Peter Dormer, 1997). He wrote, "The founders of the Bauhaus professed a debt to William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement and passionately declared that: 'Architects, sculptors, painters, we must all turn to the crafts … There is no essential difference between the artist and the craftsman […]' This vision of craft laid emphasis on the political and ideological aspects of the word. […] It also wished to use the practice of art as a weapon in the struggle towards human equality." p37.

[iii] Percent for Art programs triggered many commissions for public buildings, both for interior and exterior aesthetic improvements. For example, Kansas City, Missouri initiated its program in 1970 to set aside "1% of the engineer's estimate of the cost of constructing or remodeling any municipal building be devoted to features of aesthetic ornamentation and adornment of such building." Funding for art on a national level commenced in 1972 with The Government Services Administration (GSA) Art in Architecture program which required one half of one percent on certain Federal buildings. (Source: http://kcmo.gov/generalservices/wp-content/uploads/sites/34/2014/01/Art-in-the-Public-Realm-slideshow.pdf).

[iv] The term "éditeur" describes the role of a person who acts as the originator of a tapestry project that requires meshing a chosen artist's non-fiber art with a particular atelier capable of bringing the performance of tapestry to the artwork, a role "akin to a musical conductor, film producer, print publisher, or book editor" (Gloria F. Ross & Modern Tapestry, p3).

[v] See article “The Swiftly Growing Field of Tapestries and the Fiber Arts” in the New York Times by Ruth J. Katz, dated February 5, 1981, with the following quotes: “‘I have a gallery in Denver practically screaming at me for work. These days I cannot produce it fast enough.’ – Michelle Lester, an artist who has been weaving for 20 years and whose work includes 300 tapestries for the bulkheads of Pan American World Airways planes.” and “‘The problem isn’t selling the tapestries, it’s getting them.’ – Bill Weber, director of Modern Master Tapestries, a gallery that sells designs by well-known artists, translated into either pile or flat tapestry, for prices up to $20,000.” (http://www.nytimes.com/1981/02/05/garden/the-swiftly-growing-field-of-tapestries-and-the-fiber-arts.html).

[vi] Peter Greenhalgh in “The Persistence of Craft: The Applied Arts Today” wrote the introduction “Craft in a Changing World” discussing a number of complex factors affecting craft media as art and its critical and commercial difficulties in the postmodern world. He writes, “However, as soon as the relativist, contextual approach to the work of art acquired widespread legitimacy, by the mid-1980s, questions were raised about an apparent collapse in standards in all areas of visual culture. […] By the late 1980s a critical and theoretical war about the value of things and the nature of quality raged across the international art press. […] Two evil places were identified as the abodes of failing craftspeople: *the abyss of commercialism*, in which makers sacrificed all to make a living; and (worse) the *ghetto of bourgeois individualism,* where they gave up the specific heritage of their disciplines to embrace a generalized and debased form of Fine Art practice.” p14.

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Author's Byline

After studying architecture at the University of Illinois, Christine Laffer changed her focus to weaving. She developed her skills in tapestry under Jean Pierre Larochette at the San Francisco Tapestry Workshop, followed by an internship at the Manufacture Nationale des Gobelins in 1985. Ten year later, she completed her MFA degree at San Jose State University. She has developed a body of work for exhibitions and private collectors.