

The Museum of Modern Art

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WALL HANGINGS

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February 25 - May 4, 1969

Wall Label

During the last ten years developments in weaving have caused us to revise our concepts of this craft and to view the work in the context of twentieth-century aesthetics. Thus, for the first time at the Museum, a major exhibition -- Wall Hangings -- is being devoted to the modern weaver whose work places him not in the fabric industry but in the world of art.

A distinction should be made between the wall hangings shown in this exhibition and conventional tapestries. Although the tapestry is, in the broadest sense, also a wall hanging, traditionally it is essentially a pictorial design that has been woven of wool or silk. Tapestries were made in ancient China and Egypt, but in the western world we are most familiar with the tapestries that have been made in France since the fourteenth century. During the past three decades the tapestry industry has been revitalized in the factories of Aubusson and Gobelin. Major artists have been encouraged to create tapestry designs, and in these centers their cartoons have been transposed by craftsmen whose experience with weaving and dyeing has produced interesting results.

The weavers whose work is being shown in this exhibition are in no way concerned with the pictorial aspects of weaving, but are involved with extending the formal possibilities of the craft. They frequently use conventional weaves, but more and more often they work free of the loom, in complex and unusual techniques. The methods of construction as well as the materials used derive from their primary concern to extend the aesthetic qualities inherent in texture.

The characteristically modern concern with the physical qualities of materials can be traced back to the 1920's and the weavers at the Wienerwerkstatte, and

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particularly the Bauhaus in Germany, where explorations into light-reflecting and sound-absorbing textiles suited to mass production led to new discoveries. Studies involving some of these techniques produced more formal, but still non-pictorial, compositions.

The 28 weavers included in the exhibition come from 7 different countries. The European artists, against the background of a virile folk-art and tapestry tradition, offer many innovations: bas-relief effects, three-dimensional works meant to be seen from all sides, and unconventional materials such as sisal, rope, fur, horsehair. Among the American weavers we find some of the most satisfying and beautiful works, which serve well to illustrate some recent trends:

Susan Weitzman is a young American weaver who studied to be a painter. In her Homage to Lenore Tawney she has exploited a principle of spinning that has lain dormant for thousands of years. Her two layers of fragile, subtly colored, hand-spun wool, from natural to an orange-tan, give luminous depth to an essentially simple composition.

Ed Rossbach, from the West Coast, also uses an ancient technique: a plain weave with four-sided selvage finish. But the scale in which he creates his weave, as well as the materials -- in this case, plastic and newspaper -- lend a daring element to a technique which originated with the Pre-Columbia Peruvian weavers.

Sheila Hicks's work owes a debt to the conventional weaves, which she has reworked into the modern idiom. Yet she has used the electric pistol to produce the hooked surface she required for the upper part of her Prayer Rug. She is also exploring the use of modular units made up of thread. In her Evolving Tapestry she has used thread not as an element of intermeshing, which would have produced a plane, but as massed units to create volume.

Although the wall hangings in this exhibition utilize new and relatively unexplored materials, the modern weaver -- unlike the modern painter and sculptor -- generally shuns technological involvement. The modern weavers experiment with form, they respond

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to twentieth-century sculptural and graphic influences, but they are largely indifferent to recent developments which might substitute machines for hand tools. Their inventiveness lies primarily in expanding the aesthetic possibilities of their materials.

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