

THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

AN EVALUATION OF SWEDISH TAPESTRY

WITHIN THE WOVEN TRADITION OF SCANDINAVIA

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## INTRODUCTION

The chief aim of this research project is to introduce primarily a general history of Scandinavian textiles and subsequently to produce a more in depth analysis of one specific area of weaving, notably creative tapestry weaving in one of the five Scandinavian countries, that is Sweden.

Three chapters will constitute the main body of work. The first will involve a resume of the development of the weavers craft in the northern countries. Archaeological finds, coupled with a degree of controlled speculation, will initially provide the background to historic developments of the weave in the Bronze, Iron, and Viking ages. More positive, factual information will provide the background from the middle ages to the present day due to the existence and preservation of more complete pieces from this period.

In the second chapter, one will be introduced to preeminantly Swedish tapestry, weaving whose history will primarily be dealt with under unspieces of three traditional techniques. Later the introduction will be given to a number of associations instrumental in providing the link between Swedish tapestry of a historical, traditional nature and that which was to envolve during the sixties and the seventies.

Thus the third and final chapter will, to some degree throw light on the contemporary situations regarding Swedish tapestry. This will be achieved through a discussion on the fundamental ideas behind the works of specific tapestry artists coming to the fore during the sixties and seventies. It is hoped, moreover, that on reading the third and final chapter, one will have come to realise the metamorphoses encountered by the Swedish tapestry, from being a folkart type to becoming in a sense an aesthetic artefact.



## CHAPTER I.

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF SCANDINAVIAN TEXTILES.

In relation to European culture, the Scandinavian countries have served in many ways as a conservation area where inherited crafts and working traditions have been connected to a great extent with the production of textiles. A very large number of extant textiles of various types and ages, domestic products as well as foreign commodities have been conserved. But why, one might ask has this tradition of conservation in Scandinavia manage to withstand the passage of time? Perhaps the answer must lie in how kind history has been to the northern countries. Although for centuries the industrial production of textiles has been established in Western Europe - abolishing most domestic crafts and folk arts in those regions, in the case of Scandinavia, industrialisation had a late arrival. Also, countries like Norway and Sweden have been spared devastating wars on their own territories. Furthermore this preservation might be due to the general poor conditions and relative rareness of materials which were too precious not to be taken care of - a positive side of the average poverty through the ages predominant in the northern lands.

Thus throughout this chapter, the historical aspect of weaving in the Scandinavian countries will be dealt with primarily. For this purpose it will be necessary to look at the countries historical pattern and also archaeological finds in order to piece together the somewhat obscure and jigsawed history of the development of Scandinavian textiles. Basically the very early history of textiles will be dealt with briefly leading from the bronze and iron ages into the Roman and Migration period (c.300-550). Both the viking era (a somewhat golden age in Scandinavian history) and the middle ages, will be dealt with in greater depth, emerging at length with the present day where an overall view will be taken of the contemporary situation.



## Bronze and Iron Age Weaves.

Because the Danes were given to burying their dead in the hollowed - out trunks of oak trees, the bronze age is represented by unusually well preserved material including entire costumes and items of clothing. Often these are of a superb quality embodying highly intricate techniques and sometimes made from specially selected wool. Of special interest are two women's hood's found in Denmark, woven in a kind of open-work brading known as sprang, and some remarkable men's caps worked with the needle in imitation of a curly fleece. Bronze age finds have also been made in Schleswig - Holstein, the Rogaland area of Norway and southern Sweden.

Although at one stage it was believed that the first centuries of the iron age were devoid of textile finds, a series of southern Danish and north Servian bog finds from Celtic and Roman times have emerged to counteract this view.

Two different techniques have characterized Scandinavian finds from the Roman and Migration periods (c.300 - 550). These are respectively, rourena twill made on the warp - weighted loom and tablet woven braids, and Norway possesses the greatest number of examples of such.

Up to 1949 and 1961 all that was formerly known of Swedish textiles from this entire period (c.300 - 550), were two diminutive finds. It occurred then that the discovery was made of two important migration graves at Hojom and Norrala in north-eastern Sweden, one containing an unusually well preserved man's costume, the other, furnishings closely resembling the Norwegian finds from the migration period.

Worth noting here are the variations of tablet weaving found. The basic type with a straight twist, was used when the braid was woven together with a fabric. Many different techniques were developed for freely-executed trimming borders which in turn bear witness to an impressive degree of individual skill. Though varying the twist of tablets, the holes of which had been threaded with different coloured yarns, it was possible to produce



very effective patterns either with animal figures or geometric motifs (Snartemo V and Ovre Berge Finds).

Interesting also was the find of "Nalbinding" (one - needle knitting) in a bog at Aslo and by means of pollen analysis has been dated to the fourth or fifth century. This technique is executed with a large wooden sewing needle.

#### The Viking Period.

The reason for the choice of an in depth examination of the development of textiles during this period must lie in the fact of its being a golden age for Scandinavian, however dark for the rest of the world. Historicism certainly provides the key to an overall development of Swedish art, textiles being no exception. A knowledge of textiles from the viking period is mainly founded on two unusually large groups of finds; namely the complex collections from Oseberg and Birka which might be supplemented by smaller and lesser important groups of finds. The unique, lavishly furnished funeral ship of Oseberg dated c.860, will be dealt with primarily. Indeed, at Oseberg the textile wonders of the Viking era must display themselves.

In 1903 at the great burial mound of Oseberg, the grave of Queen Asa was discovered and excavated a year later, 1904, the excavation of a well preserved ship now to be seen in the Viking Ship Hall outside Oslo took place. The textiles present in this ship are of different kinds, including imported silks and fine woollens but there are also domestic products of a high standard among them a series of figure scenes executed in a kind of tapestry weave.

Some thirty fragments were found in the Queen's chambers, evidently remains from several oblong hangings, depicting a host of figures. The height or width of the weave was remarkably small, between sixteen and twenty five centimeters.



The actual pictorial style might be compared to the style of a miniturst, with very small elaborate figures; persons of both sexes, warriors and perhaps even Amazons, carrying shields and spears, with horses, either carrying, riders or pulling great cars. The Norwegian Bjorn Hougen endorses the view that the hanging represent religious rites and mythological scenes but emphasizes that such scenes in the first instance have epic portrayals of historic events of the kind mentioned in old Norse Sagas. Hougen also remarks on evident similarities between the wood carvings and the pictorial tapestries, drawing attention to the existence of geometrical patterns on the sculptured animal figures, similar in construction to patterns seen on the figure of the hanging.<sup>I</sup>

At this point, Birka will be returned to, that prementioned, second find belonging in time to the viking era. Since Birka in its time c.800 - 950 was a commercial centre of international importance, it multifarious finds have shed great and varied light on this period. The find was originally made in 1811 by Hjalmar Stople and within a few years one thousand, one hundred graves were excavated. Two hundred of these graves yielded a variety of unique and important textile material. Silk fabrics were found in about fifty graves with the exception of a few fabrics, including one of Chinese origin, the majority represent the multicoloured, weft - faced compound twill type (also called samitm ) which was manufactured in Byzantium and the eastern mediteranean.

But what of native Scandinavian textiles? Clearly two graves in Birka (among others in Norway) display what might be referred to as the most important specimen of early Scandinavian textile art. It is a kind of tapestry with varying stitches and binding effects, executed in multi-coloured wools on a linen warp (the latter material often decayed). Certainly there is justification for speaking of a native Scandinavian art form, if to this form of tapestry art is added the later specimens of North Swedish "sonmak tapestries" - the "Refils" from Overhogdal and Skog, which are to be seen as folk - art successors to the refined textile art that was practised at the Court of Queen Asa.





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## The Middle Ages.

The viking period is normally regarded as a transitional period leading to the middle ages. With regard to prehistoric times all evidence of textiles comes to us in the form of archaeological finds and subsequently in an incomplete state - mainly costume fragments. The middle ages present a somewhat different picture in that the majority of preservations have been of an ecclesiastical nature because of the paramount role of the church in art during the middle ages. On the otherhand, textiles were generally produced on a domestic handcraft basis for both the requirements of the individual family and as a source of extra income, particularly through barter, throughout medieval times and in fact for a considerable period after. However, larger householders manors, royal estates, and palaces doubtless provided scope for differentiation and professional specialization and were probably in a position to get hold of prototypes and patterns that could be used for local production on a minor scale. One example being the manor occupied by a congregation of nuns, said to have been founded by Saint Brigid. Here examples of coarse woolen cloth, pile rugs, plain linen tabby and tabby brocaded on the counted thread of the Dukagang type have been preserved. It is almost certain that the textile activities of the convent provided a school for various kinds of textile work, subsequently influencing the surrounding area.

In 1900 in the parish church of Overhogdal, Harjedalen, Sweden the discovery was made of a large cover, joined together at a later date by five long and narrow textiles, of which four were worked in a kind of "soumak" technique and one in double cloth. This piece was later taken apart and the pieces "refils" are now on show in the Ostersund Museum, while another refile found in the church of Skog, in a neighbouring parish was acquired by the historical museum in Stockholm.

For the most part, the folk art textiles might be regarded as a countinuation of the average production of the middle ages. Although individual prototypes and the general artistic trends of successive periods must have had their influence, these textiles on the whole have preserved their medieval character remarkably well.



This tendency towards conservation is already apparent in textiles from the end of the medieval period, which in design and type often seem to be a century older than they actually are.

Basically two varieties of medieval doublecloth exist, the technical execution of the colour change providing the differential. The older type consists of two layers - a layer of white linen which forms an irregular design against the other layer which is of wool and often chequered in red and blue. Knots and interlace motifs together with swastikas and geometrical animals form the repertoire of patterns.

The newer longer lasting double - cloth, visible in the blue and white hanging from Grodinge presents a decorative pattern of fabulous beasts on checkquerboard squares. This appears to present a stylistically skillful simplification of the well - known Persian - Byzantine type of silk designs consisting of various animal motifs generally in frames of a circular or angular nature. A wall hanging which has belonged to the church of St. Martin in Finland closely parallels that of Grodinge. This newer double cloth type also corresponds quite closely to descriptions in the court inventories for the Vasa period which in detail, accounts for many two - coloured weaves and termed in effect, "Russian" or "Finnish" weaves. Double - cloth (Dukagang) hangings with related patterns and a ground weave of either white linen or red wool, undoubtedly made before the end of the middle ages, were preserved in the Bridgettine of Vadendal in Finland where they were possibly woven. This leads one to wonder whether similar fabrics were at the prementioned Vadstena convent. In fact the existence of other techniques notably silk embroideries, and coarser works from the Finnish daughter - convent which bear close resemblance to works from the Vadstena workshop seen to reinforce the view that double - cloth was being woven in both convents.

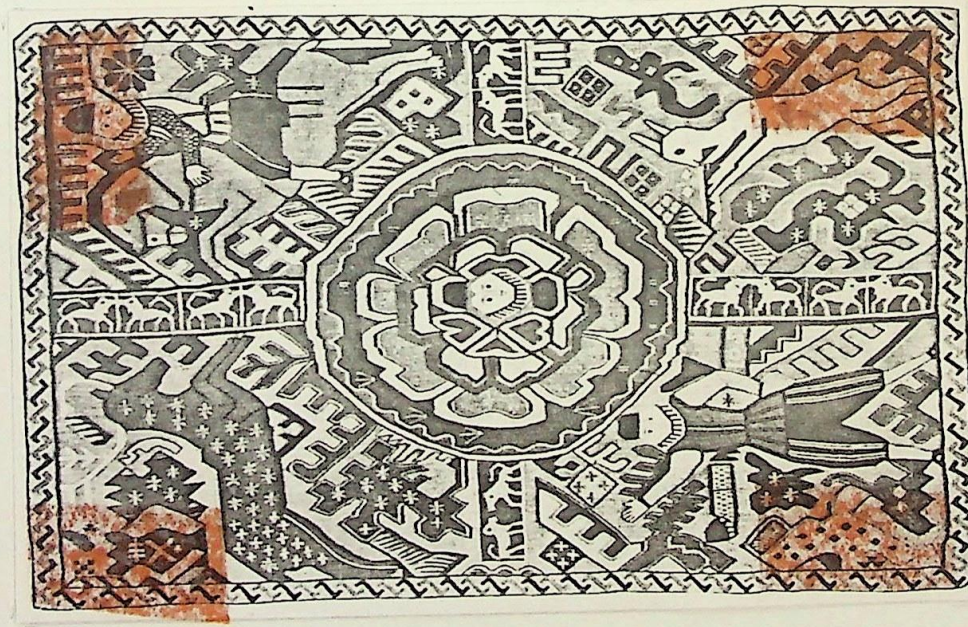


## Gustav Vasa and an Historic Influence on Textiles.

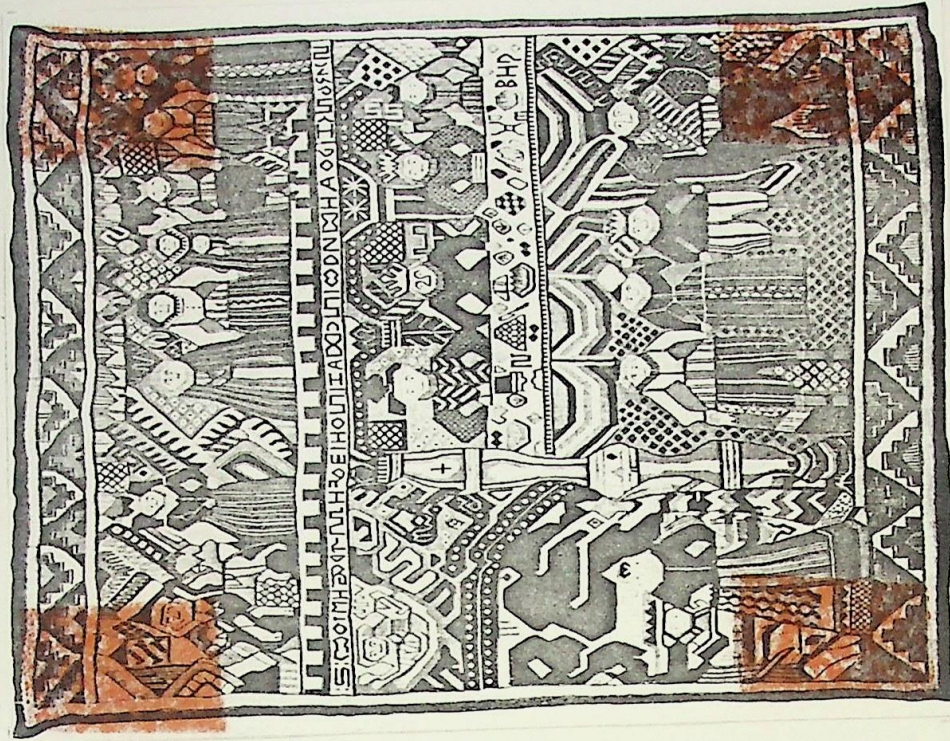
At this point it is necessary to dwell for a time on native Swedish textile production under the reign of Gustav Vasa. The prementioned seventeenth century monarch following the reformation it was decided that the king's personal servants and the officers of the crown should receive at least part of their pay in the form of clothing. Since it was not feasible to produce so great a quantity of material within the country, (the native "Wadmal" a rough cloth was considered good enough only for the rank and file of meanest servants) imports of various fabrics were made from Germany, the low countries and England. Eventually Gustav Vasa found himself presurged into sponsoring home industry. Craftsmen and sheep were imported from Germany motivating the establishment of sheep farms and fulling mills in various towns. This incited the action considerable wool producing enterprises during the seventeenth century, in keeping with the merchantile system which became increasingly influential after 1720. Most cherished of these industries were those concerned with linen, damask and silk weaving, these being protected by subsidies and special ordinances, designed to prevent competition from home crafts which were opposed by the state.

Having previously referred to home crafts and how in effect, apart from catering for a family's individual needs these could in addition provide an important supplement to their standing income. Since this procedure had been in existence for centuries a tremendous degree of manual skill and technical knowledge had been acquired which also benefited the manufacturing enterprises. It also led to an amount of collaboration between the two, despite the authorities' disfavour. But what, indeed, characterized the products of these family's homecraft industries or what must more rightfully be termed textile folk-art? Certainly it was inevitable that these decorative fabrics, embroideries etc., which were originally intended for the environment of their maker should nonetheless express that environment. The patterns and motifs of folk textiles are impregnated with the beliefs and traditions of their environment. Each alternate environment in turn differs





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from the next due chiefly to local circumstances, such as the availability of certain dyes and spinning materials.

The most significant form of folk painting was that done on wall hangings. Almost unknown outside Sweden it flourished from the mid eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century. Usually biblical themes were in the mainstream of the subject matter milieu but scenes of daily life and pictures of important people and events are also depicted. "The Marriage at Cana" was a popular subject, when the homes of newly married couples were being decorated. Icelandic sages may also own to the mention of woven hangings. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries this form of folk art was prevalent in the south in Smaland, Holland, Blekinge and Vastergotland and in the north in Dalarna, Halsingland and Gastrikland. The surviving body of old folk textiles, i.e. those produced over the past three or four centuries, are supplemented by both written documents and by a number of even older textiles belonging to the middle ages or perhaps earlier still.

However it is perhaps this longstanding tradition of homecraft or textile folk art surviving throughout the centuries in Scandinavia which has become the northern countries' characterizing factor and main claim to textile fame. Weaving has always been common to Scandinavians providing the main artistic pastime during the long winter months especially for those living in comparative isolation. Altogether Norway, Sweden and Finland, even Ireland have preserved national textile traditions. Even today, Scandinavian textiles have a quality, practicality and an appealing freshness and few ever seem to be run of the mill products but rather embody charm and reflect their countries' images. Contemporary handcraftsmen still use methods like tie dying, dying by colour - resistant areas, handblocking and overprinting.

The area of casement and drapery - fabric design has undergone much research in order to yield casement types with delicate loosely span threads that have tangled fibres to let just the right amount of light filter into the room. Also pre planned for the hanging stage are the printed drapery fabrics.



The patterns having been devised not alone for colour effect but for pattern repeats without too much waste of material. Embroidery design has always retained an important place in Scandinavian textiles, applique and embroidery are often discovered combined in wall hangings to achieve special three dimensional effects. Another division of textile weaving in which all five Scandinavian countries excel are the enchantingly colourful table linens. The traditional use of white table cloths has long since vanished in Scandinavia, dark colours like eggplant or deepolive and brilliant yellows are chosen to dramatise table ware.

Althogether, textiles may be regarded as an indelible part of the entire cultural tradition of the Scandinavian countries. Museums abound with an exciting historic woven past . Examples exist to extend from the far removed Age of Iron right through the Viking era into the well represented middle ages. It is true furthmore to state that scarcely a single school, bank, church, or other public edifice in Scandinavia does not display some exciting and altogether unique example of the weaver's art. In Munkegaard school, Gentofle Copenhagen the stage curtains are made of coarse flax, dyed pure red and interwoven with diamond shapes of intense orange, yellow, pink, red and purple. Altogether these extend a glowing colour effect to the overall composition. Mammoth embroideries and tapestries are to be found everywhere. It is true to say that no other group of countries must own to the possession of such a large quality of historic and contemporary textile pieces which in itself must clearly suggest the high regard held by the Scandinavians for their textiles.



## CHAPTER II.

### THE TRADITION OF TAPESTRY WEAVING IN SWEDEN.

If the first chapter had intended dealing with the overall development of textiles from historic times to the present day, the fundamental aim of this chapter is to introduce a more in depth, yet brief, historic study of predominantly tapestry weaving in Sweden. Initially specific types of tapestry will be examined which will to some degree outline its history. This will culminate eventually in an examination of a number of centres and workshops (formed during the latter part of the nineteenth century or early twentieth century), themselves instrumental in laying the foundation stones for contemporary tapestry weaving.

#### Types of Tapestry Weaving in Sweden.

Traditionally there are three major forms of tapestry weaving in Sweden, "Rolakan" a low warp tapestry usually geometric in pattern; Flemish (Flamsk Varnad) a high warp tapestry especially typical of south Sweden; and double weaving using two warp and two weft threads, this being created generally in Bohushein near Noteborg and Jemtland in the north.

With regard to rolakan tapestry it is generally accepted that it has existed in unbroken tradition in Sweden from prehistoric times. The ageless geometric motifs in their full simplicity present themselves constantly with special emphasis on square which form diagonal zigzag lines or combine to form simple stars. Frequently recurring also are interlaced bands, the solomonic knot motif, the eight pointed star, the eight-pointed rose and a double square. Throughout the middle ages the images became much more realistic whereupon motifs range from trees, birds, and pomegranate patterns to various types of crosses and to animal motifs of unicorns, lions, deer, the double-headed eagle and the bird inscribed in octagons. Generally rolakan's existence in Sweden is taken to belong to Skane, although examples also appear in Beekinge, southern Smaland Holland,





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southwestern Vastergotland, Bohuslan, central Sweden and Norrland. It is generally accepted that the earliest example of rolakan in Sweden can be dated with a certainty from 1710. (Example from southwestern Skane 1801).

The second form of weaving common to Sweden and to which I have previously referred is the internationally renowned gobelin tapestry technique or Flemish weaving (Flamokvav). Gobelin tapestries proper were named for the atelier created by Louis XIV in Paris 1622, "manufacture des Gobelins". At that time, it was not uncommon to name textiles for their geographical origin, thus, although today when we refer to Flemish weaving we generally imply tapestry, in the sixteenth century, the term "Flamish" (Flemish) it would appear, could have been applied to other types of fabrics imported from Flanders.

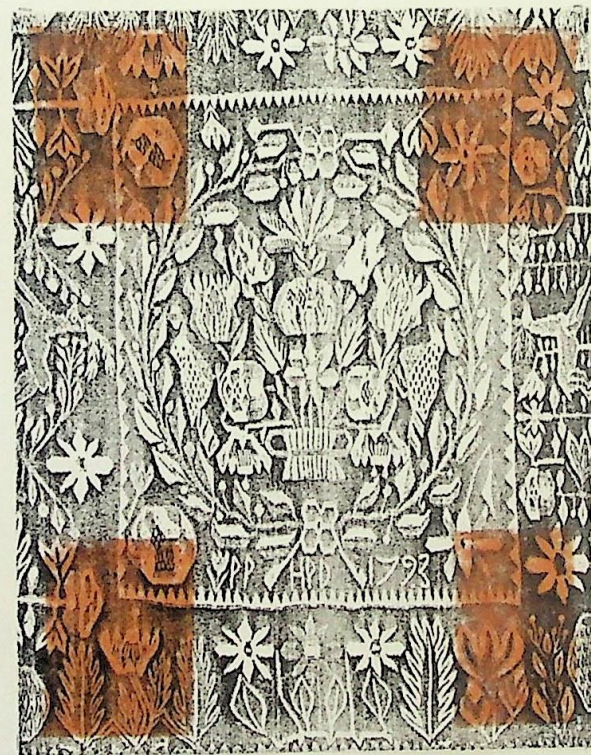
One will recall in Chapter I the reference to Gustav Vasa, whereupon the seventeenth century king, sponsored home industry. Interesting to note here, is the fact that Gustav Vasa also encouraged Flemish tapestry weaving in Sweden. He requisitioned weavers from Flanders to both instruct and train Swedish weavers in the tapestry weaving of Flanders and also to equip royal residences with woven tapestries, journeymen and apprentices worked for the royal household during both his own reign and that of his sons. Although most of these were foreigners it must be mentioned that about twenty were Swedish. Since these Flemish weavers wandered from place to place., they were instrumental in spreading the Flemish weaving technique to castles and manors and subsequently to parsonages and burgher homes (example wall hanging, Flemish weave from the sixteenth century).

Strangely enough, it appears that the typified flemish weave eventually changed from professional production to a type of handcraft preeminantly produced by women. This ultimate change brought about a transformation in the design of the product.





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Fundamentally Flemish weaving is a technique whereby the weft is discontinuous and is inserted area by area not across the full width of the warp. It therefore lends itself quite easily to free work, and had been used extensively for pictorial representation. On becoming a female homecraft, interesting to note, however, was that painterly aspects, perspective and three dimensionality all disappeared from the scenes, whether landscapes or interiors. The difficulty in rendering certain animal or human forms, appears to imply the reason for the female weavers oblitterating them. Stylized flowers and leaves were instead adopted and adopted to fit the new simplified version of the technique. The female weavers had perhaps collected a store of isolated motifs drawn on paper which could be combined in different ways. This ensured that the heretofore original and dramatic story-telling representations, were simply fragmented, their parts taking on the appearance of ornamental compositional schemes.

But where specifically was Flemish weaving to be found? As with the Rolakan type it would appear that the main local point for Flemish tapestry weaving belonged yet again with Skane. From Malmo's ledgers and protocols we are provided with accounts of women working as weavers in large houses where they remained until orders were completed, working rather like seamstresses. In fact, Malmo's aristocrats, could own to the possession of tapestries used chiefly for interior decoration **purposes** as late as the latter part of the seventeenth century, extending even into the early part of the eighteenth, whereupon the weavers were to turn to the more conservative peasant homes, possibly travelling from place to place with their pattern collections.

Outside of Skane, Flemish weaving presents itself in the Smaland parsonages and the Vastbo district. In the latter area, Kristina Hellman was responsible for a group of tapestries created during the second half of the eighteenth century. It is believed that she may have acquired the skill while living in Skane during her fathers period as vicar in Kristianstad, her three daughters in turn were also weavers. Furthermore, the women of the Krook family of clergymen (from the same district) were



avid weavers. Since all three Krook daughters married into peasant families they must have been instrumental in some manner in bringing Flemish weaving to the peasant mihen. Evidence of this is characterized by the subject matter common to both which appears again and again in a highly stylized form - forest scenes with running stag, flowers and leaves, flowers urus and flowers and birds.

According to archival sources we are led to believe that flemish weaving was common in parsonages on Oland and on large farms in the seventeenth century but whether these tapestries were locally or imported is unknown. Some flemish tapestries have also been found in Blekinge but these quite possibly originated in Skane. While some eighteenth century flemish tapestries have been found in central Sweden and Norrland it is impossible to tell if they had been woven here, since their patterns make it difficult to piece them in any specific production milieu.

#### The Background to Contemporary Swedish Tapestry.

Undoubtedly it is true to suggest that modern Swedish textile arts have their roots in both the handicraft movement of the last century and the national romantic movement of the turn of the century. Although industrialism had begun to make its mark by the latter part of the nineteenth century enforcing a destiny of true extinction on Swedish folk art, the latter nonetheless experienced a revival at the beginning of the twentieth century under the direction of the Association for Swedish handcrafts (Foreningen for Svensk Himsfojd) which had been founded in 1899. A number of local handcraft associations had simultaneously been formed all over the country these were to culminate in 1912 forming the National Association of Swedish Handcraft Societies (Svenska Hemslojdsforeningars Riksforbund) which continues even today, to be the central organisation for Swedish handcraft.



In fact , it is probably true to say that the majority of today's leading Swedish textile artists have had contact with living folk textile art receiving initial training at a local association. Thus the handcraft movement must be credited to some extent with motivating the tremendous interest held by the Swedish people for textiles.

Nevertheless, it will be observed that this traditionalism was to be contested to some extent by the textile workers of the 1920's and 1930's. Of these the altogether significant must be Marta Maas - Fjetterstrom, who is especially remembered for her creation of a modern Swedish form of rug art. This was apparently inspired by both Swedish peasant textiles and Persian rug art, but predominantly by her country's nature. The light nordic summer. Although she died in 1941 the monument to her efforts, her workshop founded in 1919, was preserved by a rescue campaign and equipped for future work. The workshop which soon became known as Marta Mass-Fjetterstrom AB (this title still remains even today) received Barbro Nilsson as its new artistic leader. Nilsson at the time had been renowned for her creation of large monumental tapestries made in co-operation with various artists. As head of this institution she continued to achieve a sense of greatness in her work, producing a number of rugs, today considered classics, while also creating the before mentioned monumental tapestries for public places. Her technical knowledge of the skill has allowed for her renewal of older methods of weaving creating rugs that sing with colour and are still in harmony with the places that they are intended for.

Of the two students, Marianne Richter and Ann-Mari Forsberg, engaged at the time for the workshop, Marianne Richter is still active today with Marta Mass - Fjetterstrom AB. Her talent lies in her creation of richly imaginative patterns which have deep roots in folk art.



Recent years have seen her design new original patterns for rugs, for example, "Korsvirke" (cross-timber) in a peasant technique. On the other hand Ann - Mari Forsberg is perhaps more sparing in her production. Her patterns are graphically clear for both rugs and tapestries especially a series of large hangings all connected to Swedish history, culture and Swedish summer. Barbro Nilsson, at length, was to find a successor in Kaisa Melanton who served as artistic leader for the Marta Mass - Fjetterstrom AB from 1971 to 1975, an example of this individuals work may be visualized in Journey in Space. A relatively permanent circle of artists is employed by the workshop, the rugs are woven by a skilled group in Bastad (province of Skane, south Sweden), some of the tapestries have also been woven in Stockholm.

It will be observed that Marta Maas - Fjetterstrom AB was responsible for the production of Swedish rugs and woven goods extending right across the textile Milieu (although the textile art of tapestry was nonetheless well represented). At this point it is necessary to introduce an institution which deals predominantly with Sweden's free monumental textile art. This institution is known as Handarbetets Vanner (roughly translated as the Friends of Textile Art Association) and is centred in Stockholm. But where did H.V. (to which it might be more conveniently referred) originate, what motivated its introduction and moreover, what is its purpose today? As early as 1874 the institution had been founded, laying the groundwork at the turn of the century for the free pictorial tapestries which have occupied so prominent a position in Swedish twentieth century art.

Between 1951 and 1977 H V activities have been led by Edna Martin, herself a talented textile artist. As organiser of the centre she hired two young artists (the prementioned) Kaisa Melanton and Sten Kauppi. No less than thirty artists have co-operated with H.V. during the 1960's and 1970's, among these are Siri Derkert, Eric Grate (tapestry for the Swedish Embassy in Moscow), Acke Oldenburg, Jngegerd Moller (tapersry for the Blackeberg Hospital in Stockholm), Hans Krondaw,



Lennart Rodhe (an eighteen - meter - long tapestry for the National Record Office in Stockholm), Endre Nemes, Gosta Werner and Max Walter Svanberg. H.V. has used Svanberg's Surrealistic oriental, colourful art to create a number of important tapestries, displayed among other places, at the Biennule for tapestries in Lausanne. H.V.'s production is intended almost entirely for public buildings. Furthermore under Enda Martin a change has been carried out at the institute from weaving haute-lisse to basse-lisse (horizontal wrap) meaning that weaving can be done with the right side up. The centre readily embraces new ideas, coupling an openness for new artistic solutions with a desire for experimentation. Therefore the more than century old H.V. has undoubtedly become reknowned as one of the most important centres in the world for producing unique textile works.

A great flow of production has taken place in a number of private individual workshops in addition to that which has taken place at Marta Maas - Fjetterstrom AB and H.V. Alf Munthe (1892 - 1971) originally a painter and for a time H.V.'s foremost artist was composing textile works for public buildings as early as the 1920's. From the beginning of the fifties to the end of the sixties he had acquired his own workshop along with Greta Gahn in Leksand in central Sweden. What characterizes his work may be described as an altogether unique mixture of refined sensitivity and a precision which is almost mathematical. This latter point must in some manner have led to his becoming chiefly an artist for architects. Alongside his desire for order in design may be placed his regard for the atmosphere of the room for which the tapestries were created. He produced a number of works for churches and other public places which were often based on old techniques of weaving.

Thus the purpose of this chapter has been to briefly outline the development of Swedish tapestry weaving. At this point it will have been observed that not alone can Sweden own to a unique weaving tradition it also possesses an interesting



if somewhat chequered history in the area of tapestry weaving (briefly assessed here). What might be found interesting was the manner in which the somewhat alien Flemish weaving deeply rooted itself in Swedish homes (aided to some degree by the enterprising Gustav Vasa) and was transformed into a simplified stylized decorative female craft. It is moreover ironic and amusing to note that a slight fear or disability in tackling technical problems could be responsible for the emergence of an entire epoch of simple ornamental, compositional schemes. Although the associations launched at the end of the nineteenth century or the beginning of the twentieth century produced individuals whose work was to strongly deviate from this early folk art, it must nonetheless be realised that folk art has a tremendous influence on these Swedish weavers in the genesis of their work. Finally this chapter's importance lies in its ability to throw light on the historical and contemporary background to Swedish tapestry weaving which is ultimately necessary before meeting the third chapter.



### CHAPTER III.

#### TEXTILE ARTISTS OF THE REVOLUTIONARY SIXTIES AND SEVENTIES.

Although the fifties was a rich decade for textile production, its significance would be somehow lost, if placed alongside the unique productions for which the sixties were altogether responsible. It is true moreover to state, that in the revolutionary social climate of the day, it is not suprising that the individual textile artist was to receive a new lease of life. Although this feeling was of a worldwide nature, extending throughout America, Europe and other parts of Scandinavia, (international recogintion was attained by Magdalena Abakanowicz and other polish artists, whose work broke away from the wall and evolved into three-dimensional sculpture), none could have envisaged the effect its implications could have had for creative Swedish textile art. Within Sweden a new generation reassorted the right to unique creation and gave more precise expression to this claim. The days when the skillful reproductions of patterns, threads by thread, defined textile art, were no more. Textile art had become a metter of dynamics atmosphere and juggling with forms and colours, and its representatives had begun to claim parity with other fine arts.

Thus throughout this chapter the introduction must be envisaged of a number of notable textile artists whose work must unfold something of the spirit of the time since all are still actively weaving today, the time context will not alone span the revolutionary sixties, but will also extend right across the seventies to the contemporary tapestry weaving scene in Sweden.

As with all pending revolutions, the undercurrent winds of change usually exist for quite sometime, a mere spark being all that is necessary to bring them to the fore. The revolution to occur in Swedish textiles was no exception.



It was at the Form Fantasi, a major exhibition of applied art, which the Swedish Society for Industrial Design arranged in the spring of 1964 that many of these young revolutionary textile artists made their debut. The majority of these were pupils of Edna Martin (School of Art and Design). While some successfully managed to adapt old traditional techniques to their own individual expression of unconventional ideas, others audaciously cut right across tradition, turning their back on it, in fact revolting against it. This latter point might be envisaged in a tendency towards cutting up their pieces of cloth, of letting yarn ends billow, like as if they had come from worn army banners. It is interesting, to note that this freedom was encouraged, situations being organised, which would ultimately contribute to this. For instance Edna Martin arranged inspiration periods, suffused with music, extically aromatic spices, and the recitation of exciting passages from curious books, seemingly anything which might condition an unusual unconventional frame of mind. The transformation of old traditional techniques into a new language of form was also encouraged.

This latter point leads to the mention of one of the students who emerged at "Form Fantasi" this being Helena Hernmarck. Her first independent works, such as "Beta", exhibited in 1964 possessed an inspiration and musicality that were new to Swedish weaving. She used a very old technique as a basis, a technique of patterned weaving called "Rosengang" (rose path) and adapted it to what she herself called "Free Rose Path" inserting additions by hand to enhance the surface structure. A series of wall hangings and carpets, all appeared in quick succession, all named after letters of the Greek alphabet. The motifs in her early works spring from a rhythmic play of expressive hieroglyphs, floating as though in rapid motion and contrasting with the static rose-path pattern. Such creations, it will be observed, possess an affinity with contemporary movements in painting of a spontaneous nature but they convey the impression of complete originality, being dependent entirely on the textile medium.



The mid sixties saw Helena Hernmarck move to Montreal where she encountered a community which was totally new to her. The autumn of 1968 saw the arrival of several major commissions and within the space of six months she wove a number of imposing pieces. Among these were included "The Launching of the Q E 2" for the liner of the same name and also one of her most significant works of the period "Newspapers" which was intended for the press of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in Sweden House in Stockholm.

There is possibly something of an epic element to be visualized in "Newspapers". The artist has chosen for subject matter, ephemeral material. Sections of newspapers, at some points suggestively torn, appear to hint at the new sense of three dimensionality beginning to creep into weaving. The subject matter also displays a sensitivity to, and interest in international current affairs of the time, yet Helena Hernmarck is totally objective in her selection of printed media. These sections are all carefully chosen, the implications towards specific events are certainly visible but nonetheless subtle, even shrouded in mystery. Altogether the sense of timelessness is ultimately important, and can be readily grasped by any audience. Generally this piece is regarded as one of her key pieces being the first, in which photographic material was used for primary material. Furthermore, applying the vast pictorial world of photography to the textile medium is more a means of achieving greater concreation than the suspected shortcut. Therefore, while Europe and America's avant - garde engrossed itself with playfully abstract three dimensional work (dominating the Lausanne Biennales) Helena Hernmarck paved the way via photography to an illusionary language speaking of cities and the countryside as well as western lifestyle and enterprise.

This latter point must lead to yet another interesting piece of work by this artist. What immediately strikes one on observing "Steel I" by Helena Hernmarck. The vibrant use of colour, the hanging is practically ablaze with energetic yarns of red, yellow and orange, nonetheless subtly counteracted by the quite more subdued dark, light and medium browns and greys, blues, greens and pinks.



Her choice of subject matter is quite interesting, and in a sense unusual certainly denoting something of the departure from the more conventional pre-sixties themes. The ediface of a steel works, nevertheless, lends itself totally to the weave, whereupon we are allowed to observe an objective depiction of what the interior of a steel works has to offer. The composition is excellent, nothing contrived or pretentions exists, everything is organized and clearly presented.

Because the weaver's craft greatly attracts her and acquiring a skill in this field is important to her, Helena Hernmarck Has insisted always on weaving her own design. It is, moreover the process of weaving which is crucial for her art in terms of the interplay of yarns. Mary Hunt Kahlenberg at the Los Angeles Museum has drawn attention to these functions at various levels apart from also noting the link between Helena Hernmarck's work and narrative tapestries from the Renaissance. A comparsion can also to drawn with the baroque artist Peter Paul Rubens. Her colour use in "Steel I" might adhere somehow to the colour generally used by Rubens, and certainly the subject matter and composition of figures as envisaged in "Sailing" resembling to some extent that used by Rubens in his religions painting. Helena Hernmarck has chosen an approach which involves large and demanding commissions. With great inventiveness in the choice of motifs and astonishingly skillfull and eventful technique she has given beauty and warmth to much of Sweden's architecture.

Without making conspiceously subjective evaluations, she manages to mirror the world around her, so that her work can readily be understood, establishing an immediate and broad contact with her public. There is nothing tense or pretentious about her work. In fact with her way of working, I believe she has independently renewed the art of tapestry weaving and made an international career, unparalleled by that of any other Swedish textile artist.



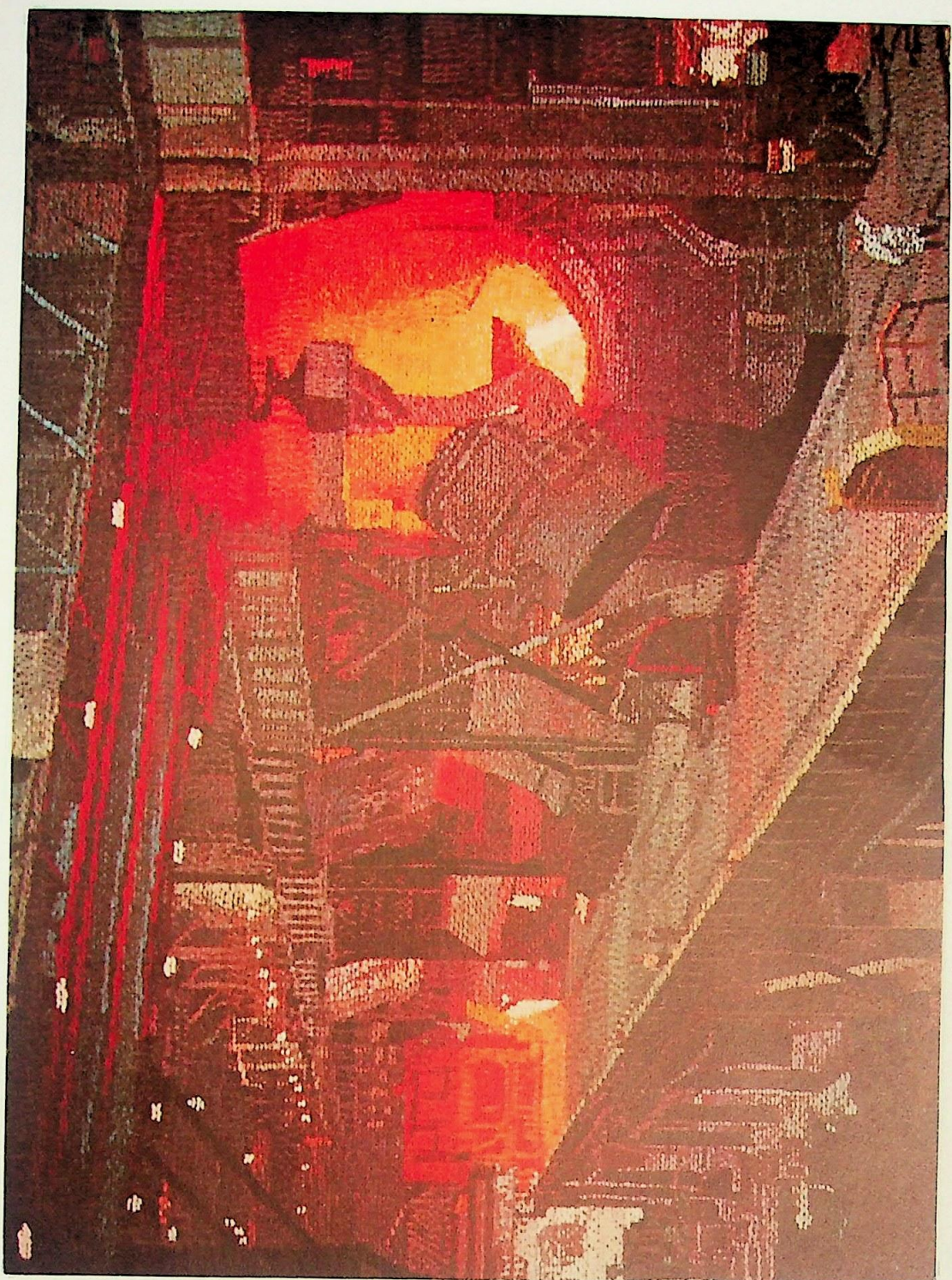


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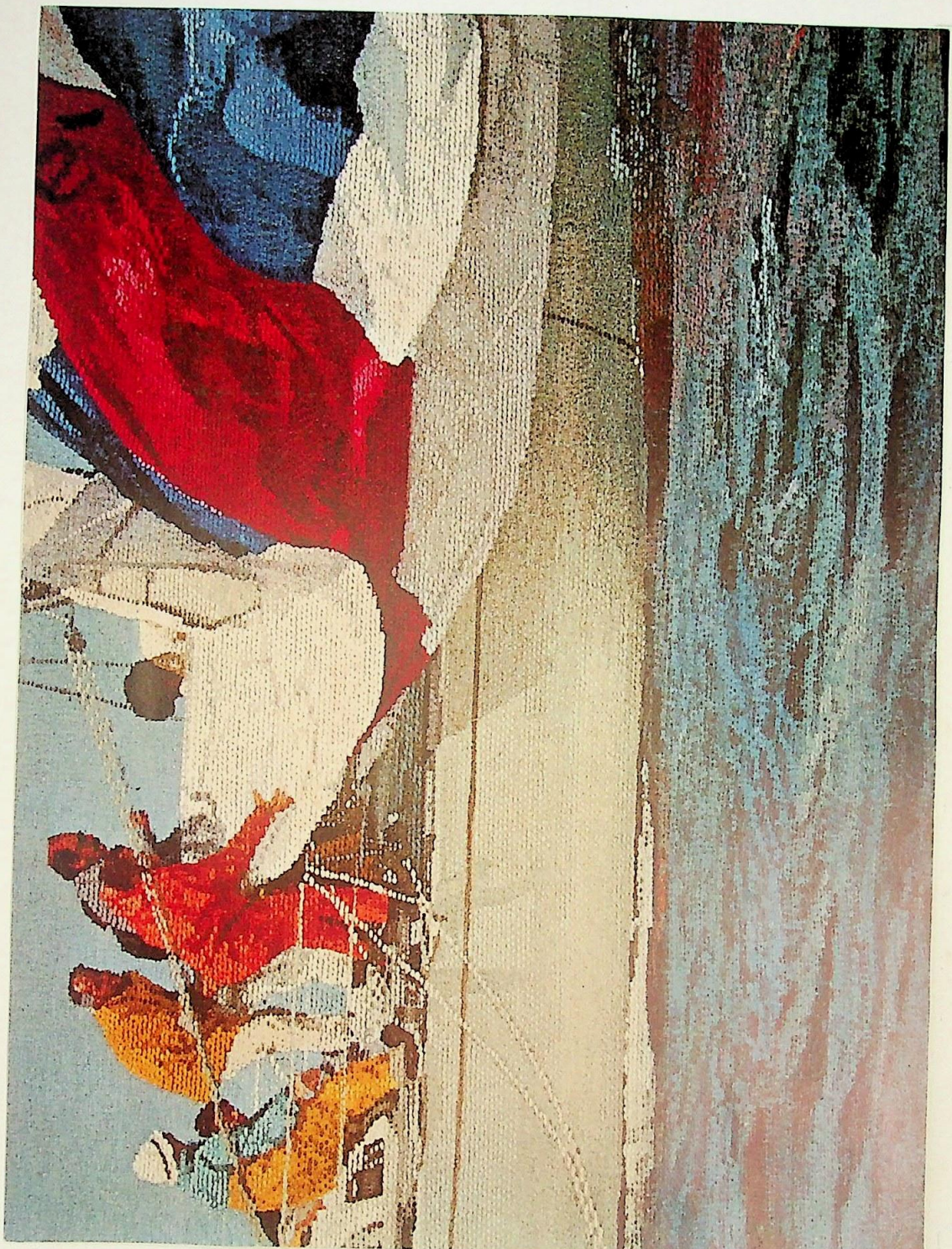






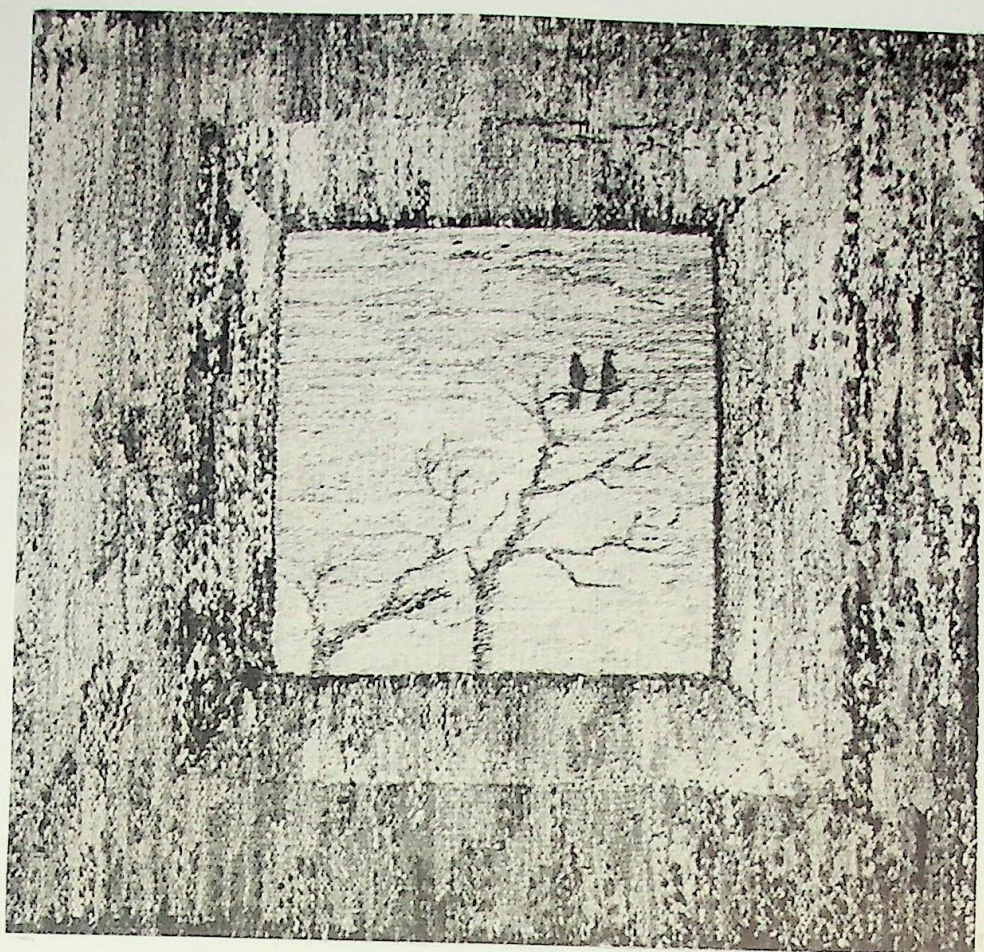






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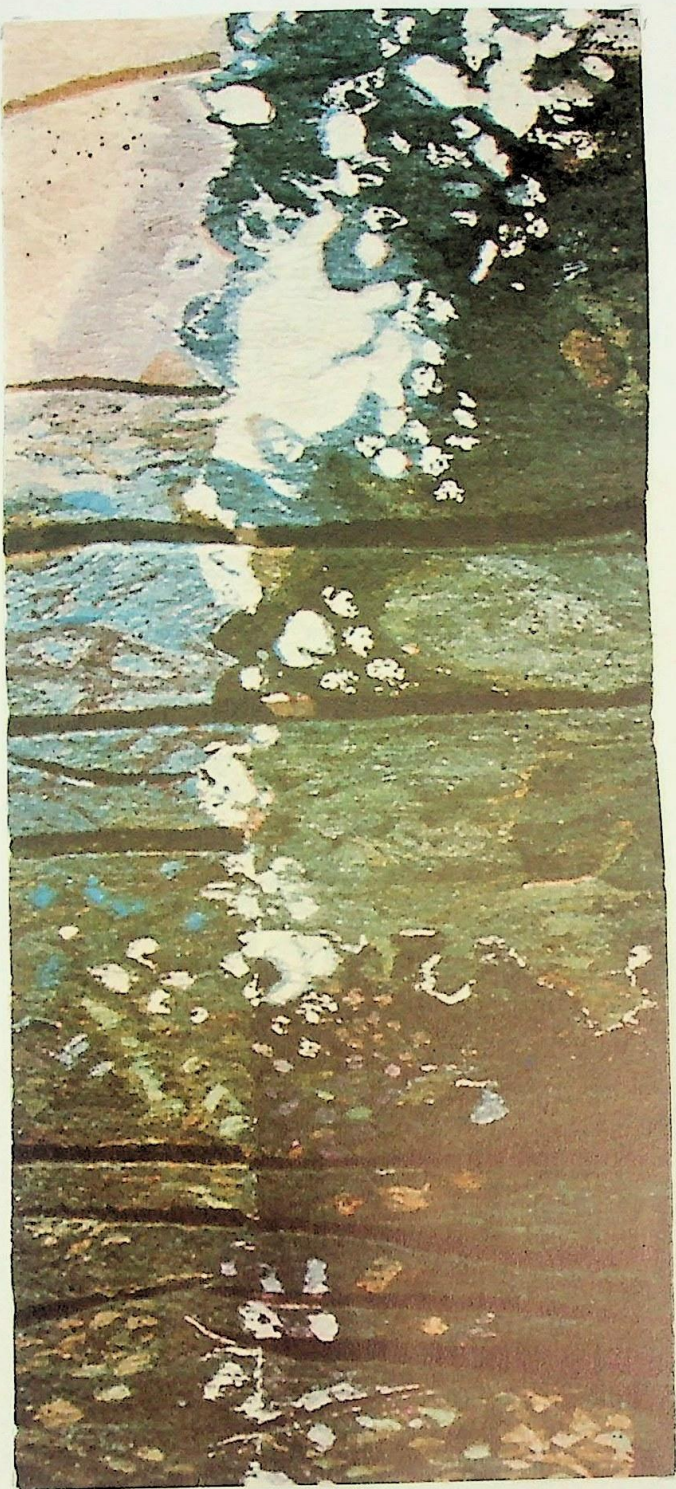


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Also making her debut at the "Form Fantasi" exhibition was Maria Triller who has proven to be one of the most talented weavers of her generation. Maria Triller, from the fore, always felt a strong urge to work with textiles. The intimations of mystical legend in the work of Paul Klee played a part in evoking Maria Triller's own pictoric language.<sup>2</sup> She herself constructed a symbolic world related to his by means of applique - embroidery or crocheting on a woven fabric. From an early stage she had come into the limelight, receiving large commissions which she was never afraid to tackle, in fact, meeting the deadlines for these, went a long way towards establishing within her, a necessary element of technical self confidence. Her designs created during the latter part of the sixties call for a change from the shuttle to the freer gobelin technique. The symbols etched against a ground are still evident in these works but the greater flexibility they tend to merge with a more fluffy, fluid ground.

Maria Triller's colour use is usually one composed of muffled earth tones or otherwise an ascetic, abstract black - and - white. In discovering the deftness, with which she combines wool of different colours, and carding it into the desired shade, the reality of her art is uncovered. A parallel with the painter's palette in her use of colour is apparent, yet when asked why she doesn't paint she replies "In textiles I get everything that is in painting and more besides, I have more depth and life in the surface, I can work with structure as well as colour and I find that the actility of textiles enhances expression and feeling".

Some of Maria Triller's more recent work displays a tear, a gap, which alters the play of light, interrupting the evenness and regularity of the weave and creating illusion and tension. She also sews on "Wings" which hang down and move in a draught. She is nonetheless aware of to what extent she can intrude upon the domain of sculpture and depart from textiles since textiles should be textiles, not a sculptural edifice.



While sh<sup>e</sup> appears to derive a degree of strength from both nature and music, her work has recently shown a tendency towards people and figurative depiction. Even as such they do not appear in their natural distinctive state. Even the cartoons are sketched over, blurred, and left as misty suggestions (This is evident in work like "Svit Med Gra Ramar", "Provvavnad till Rida" and "Ja da Juble Skogens Trad"). Worth mentioning here, is Maria Triller's habit of day dreaming, sinking onto a sun<sup>b</sup>conscious level before rising in the morning. It is in this semi conscious state, where no pictures actually materialize, that she finds moods and feelings striving for expression. Her work might be described as an intuitive or instinctive process which is somehow difficult to put into words "If only it didn't sound pretentious I would say it is a matter of making tangible music. The finished work is something in its own right intrinsic and abstract like music. It is not representational. Just itself, like a gem".

If the sixties could initiate the breakthrough of a more liberal form of textile art, it was inevitable that by the arrival of the seventies, the use of textiles would have gained a pr<sup>e</sup>dominant position. With the use of textiles as an art medium particularly in the decoration of public buildings, it is important to therefore realise its availability to a wide public. Those artists who work with textiles obviously have different bases for their creative work. Some, it will be found, work mostly with textile prints and yard goods, others relate to a domestic popular textile tradition and yet there are those who primarily consider themselves illustrative artists and choose for very special reasons to work with textiles.

A special mention must be given to Elisabet Hasselberg - Olsson whose work is fascinating in its clarity and precision. She began to weave in the mid sixties, appearing first with reserved Chinese tapestries in white or very sober colours, in which only the nubble of the woof, light as a breath suggested a movement or a simple motive. So the early work is relatively abstract - some trunks, a white expanse entitled sea, the suggestion of a profile.





a





b



A change appeared around 1970 when a new realism entered her art, parallelling the reproduction of reality in painting. She began to use concrete objects, without being too explicit. as vehicles of expression.

Basically her work may be thought of as evolving from a feeling, and something is selected with which to express it. For instance, "Expectation" for her is symbolised by a door. She enjoys empty space and empty surfaces since they appear to offer so many possibilities. Things, should not be too imposing; a landscape veiled in a soft mist appeals to her. Both "Edna" and "Gryning" exist to exemplify this. Much of her weaving is bathed in a light haze, the mild clarity to be found at dawn and dusk. In her weaving this impression is conveyed by a single thread of dry crisp rayon among all the other strands making up a weft in the composition. She often uses a mixture of flax and silk in her works, - forming very delicate lights and "scenes" where the carefully drawn picture appears to the onlooker as a remote memory, recalled and recreated with effort. The landscapes she depicts exist in reality. They can be found everywhere: The skirt of the wood, the path through the forest, the house, or the meadow, in her woven works, pictures emerge without being too obtrusive; possessing something in essence of the faded photograph but yet are forward looking. They display a limitless tenderness and a love for the path of humanity.

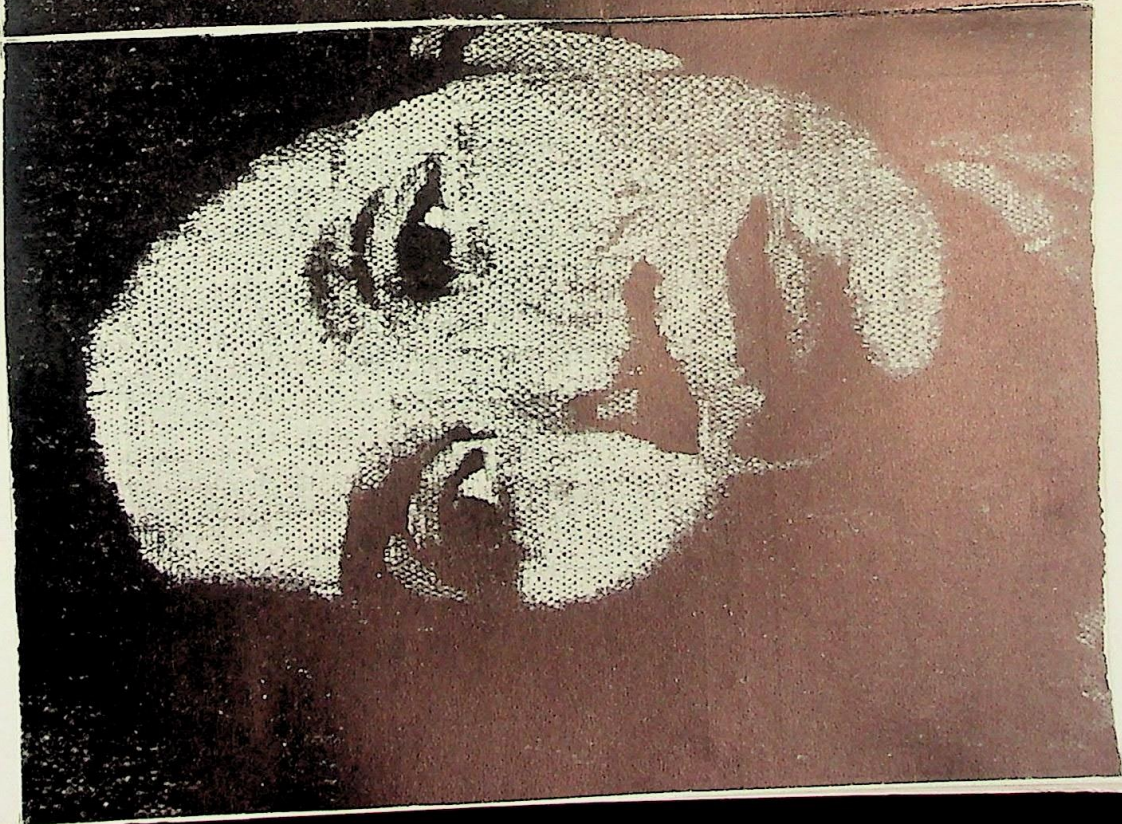
Her colours are exceedingly subdued. A distillation of grey hues - sometimes blue, pure white or light earth tones - where every nuance is expressive, has become her hallmark. This is exemplified in the prementioned "Elden" where her characteristic light earth tones are used to denote mystical shapes - rather like a landscape bathed in mist. This latter fact must illustrate why Elisabet Hasselberg - Olsson dyes all her yarn herself - in order to achieve just the right faint tones. She weaves quite excessively in blue also, which she finds capable of expressing everything. The thriving vegetation in one "Farmland" is a lively blue, conveying the beneficial aspects of growth.



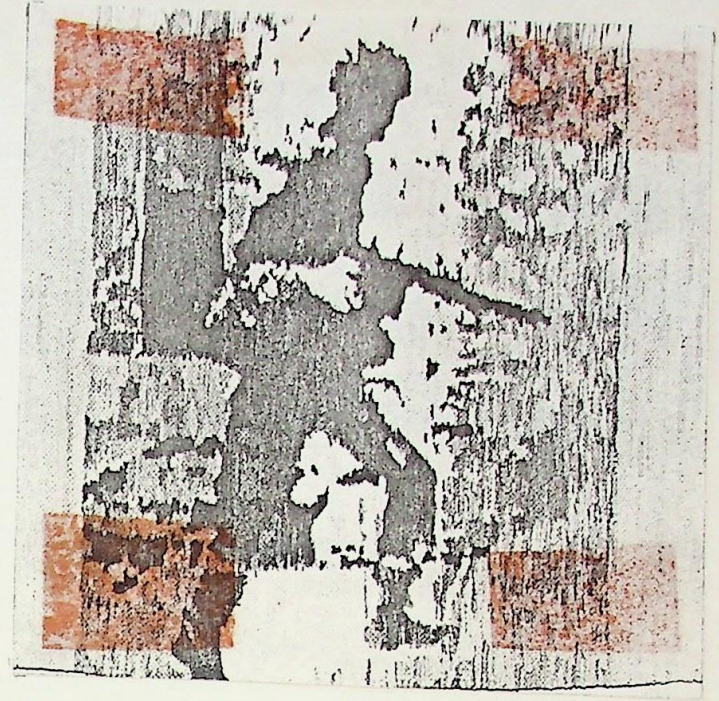
This leads to a second textile artist of the seventies. In 1972, Maria Adlercreutz appeared in an exhibition which also displayed works based on pictures in the daily press. Her tapestry pictures were to reflect an intensively human and political involvement. Her protest against the war in Vietnam, as envisaged in her work, was a powerful reaction to a current situation. Based on candid newspaper pictures, her works do more than photographically recreate, they involve a method of weaving which makes her tapestry a very humane comment on a general human tragedy. The marvellously emotive piece - "In her eyes is preserved the light of the people" (1972), exemplifies this point. A portrait on the left transmits by its nature something of the agonies and horror of human suffering. The weave yields to the expression of extreme melancholic reflection upon features moulded through pain. The eye, primarily captivated by this, is subsequently led to the right of the tapestry to experience more readily moving, trauma and fear. This in a sense throws physical light on what the foreground facial gestures suggest. Something of a similar emotive quality may be experienced on seeing "Four pictures of the Third World" whereupon Maria Aldercreutz appears to almost sketch with the yarn using blurred images which nevertheless successfully illustrate her point of view.

As a pupil at the Swedish State School of Arts and Design, Maria Aldercreutz had worked a great deal with dying yarn and the colorist aspect of textiles. Nevertheless it later appeared that she was constantly possessed by a desire and longing to use the restrained colours and soft, yarn to produce something other than merely attractive surfaces, that in fact she wanted to express something far stronger and more necessary. It was just after the "Song My Massacre" that she created her woven pictures in which the soft yarns and beautiful grey tones were to form the features of the people who were killed, herded, like cattle and then laid in a mass grave.









b



However much a paradox it might seem, it appears that Maria Adlercreutz works help us understand that which in actual fact is impossible to understand or encompass with our thoughts. The terrible contrast between human like and inhuman death illustrated by the soft warm yarn and the schematic yet instructive mass media illustration. Horrifying and unhuman situations are never as strongly emphasized as when seen beside the gentleness which is destroyed.

The mid seventies introduced a group of textile artists (centred in Goteborg) who were to very consciously reflect political and social opinions in their art. One of these was Sandra Jkse - Bergman who depicted the lives of women, either factory workers in Sweden or situations from the Third World in technically skillfully tapestries, often with photographs as the basis for her work. In her use of everyday pictures of women she seeks a focal point where the trivial meets the monumental. This is perhaps the context in which the textile illustration today has made its foremost contribution - in permitting us to see greyness and isolation together with the heroic, all expressed in the traditional medium of womens expression and dreams, woven, textile.

This latter point, if seemingly sexist in nature, will be greater understood if one might recall the reference in a previous chapter to the origins of weaving as a predominantly female skill. To recap briefly, generally in Swedish peasants society it was the women who did the weaving and who passed on their skills to their daughters. When men have been engaged in working with textiles, they have often concentrated on industrial production processes. It may be stated that the women who use textiles as a means of artistic expression in Sweden today, do so because textiles have comprised the artistic medium to which by tradition women have been assigned and also because in working with textiles they have felt a form of solidarity with all womanhood in the past.





a



c



b



To return to Sandra Jkse - Bergman, it is true to suggest that the motifs by her reflect those used by Maria Adlercreutz (whose works have been previously discussed somewhat briefly). The former, however, is of a younger generation, therefore her way of creating a picture with the yarn is totally different. With Sandra Jkse - Bergman the colours, the yarns and the methods of weaving are dominant means of expression, resulting in a violent and contrasting way of building up the pictures. She uses improvisation to a certain extent and never plans her pictures in detail, but the technique in every part is a result of her feeling for, and experience of a motif. This manner allows for the use of the same motif as often as desired - everytime the variations in the weaving technique provide new expression and new pictures.

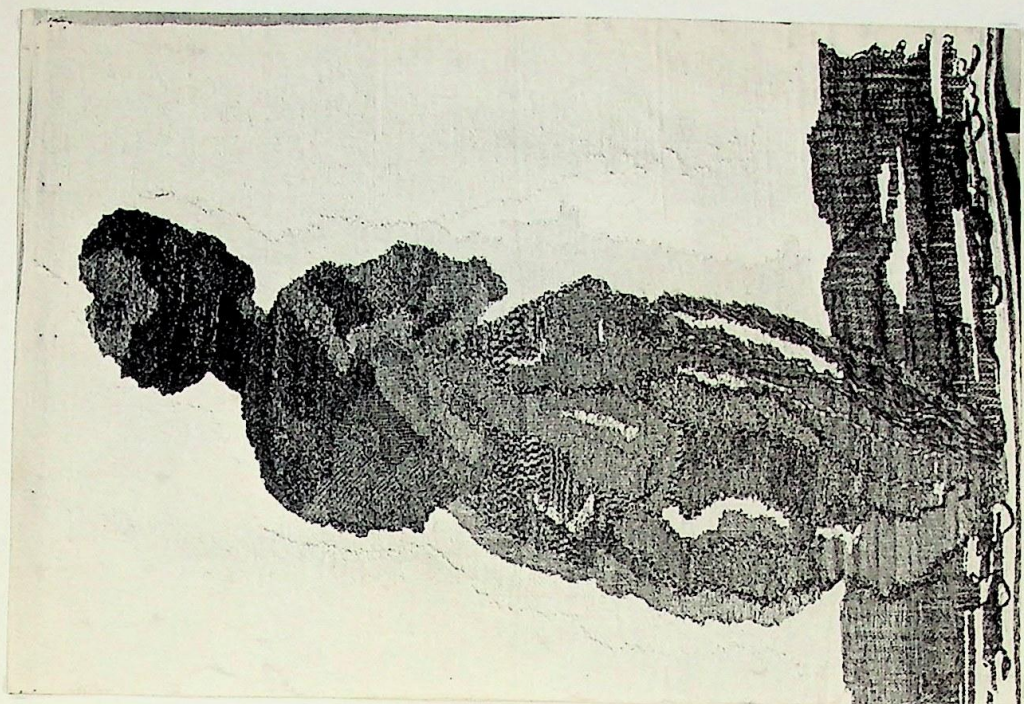
Tapestries like "Mother and Child in front of a tower block", "Liberation" (1975) and "Victim of War", visually display a certain affiliation with the work of Maria Adlercreutz. Although Sandra Jkse - Bergman's treatment is totally different, there nonetheless exists a similar sense of sympathy with human suffering and emotion however graphically stated.

Finally the mid seventies also released new powers in some important textile artists who had made their debut much earlier. A brief introduction to the ideas and concepts underlying the work of Ulla Schumacher Percy would serve to illustrate this. Ulla Schumacher Percy had appeared with embroidery as early as the 1940's. During the seventies she was to present two mighty exhibitions one which had as its theme "The Human Landscape" depicted in a number of intensive tapestries, man's bondage and freedom. The other had figure - heads as a theme in which dreams and myths about the mediterranean culture took form. Generally Ulla Schumacher Percy created her tapestries on the basis of strong poetic inspiration, an inspirational sense which could possibly give birth to works in any medium, but for various reasons she chooses to work with textiles. Her subject matter is often taken from historical encounters - an architectural experience for instance. Some years ago, she made a series of woven works on the theme of the





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Catalan architect, Antoni Gaudí and his organic art forms. She has depicted orphans searching for Eurydice as a galleon form in constant motion. She has also described the strange world of the seabed ("At the bottom of the Sea" for example), among the remains of drowned people on the basis of a wrecked figurehead. The Swede, Beate Sydhoff states; 'I cannot rid myself of the thought that these figureheads, torn loose from their ships, constitute some form of symbol for our own wandering existence and its lies with the ship we call life'.

In this the third and final chapter the chief purpose has been to indicate how important and necessary the sixties and seventies have been for the development of Swedish tapestry weaving. The emphasis has been on relating brief accounts of the concepts and works of individual textile artists figuring prominently in this revolutionary climate. By the end of the sixties both Helena Hernmarck and Maria Triller had successfully initiated a breakthrough any existing barriers. The former brought creative tapestry more into line with modern painting while simultaneously preserving the necessary dependence on the textile medium. This may have been envisaged in her early works (for example "Beta") whereupon motifs stemming from expressive rhythmic hieroglyphs, seemingly floating as if in rapid motion and contrasting with the static rose-path pattern, possess an affinity with contemporary movements in painting of a spontaneous nature. Helena Hernmarck's choice and treatment of subject matter, her use of inventive colour schemes and her application of the pictorial world of photography to the weave combined and contributed in toto, to produce tapestries of an innovative and objective nature. Maria Triller on the other hand, demonstrated the possibility of a link between music and the weave in producing instinctively abstract textiles. Thus it is not surprising, that the seventies should have enhanced this revolutionary spirit even further.



It will have been envisaged that contemporary controversial issues were uppermost in the mainstream of creative thought (as exemplified both the works of Maria Adlercreutz and Sandra Jkse - Bergman). Nevertheless, textile artists like Elizabet Hasselberg - Olsson and Ulla Schumacher Percy, it will be remembered, could gain inspiration from both nature and poetry respectively. Undoubtedly, therefore, it must be concluded that the sixties and seventies, opened the doors to creative visual and conceptual thinking, loosing forever the padlocks of conventional stereotyped thought.



#### CHAPTER IV.

#### CONCLUSION.

Although Sweden possesses a tapestry tradition of a unique quality, its altogether historical development must not be seen in isolation, since parallels are evident in other European countries. The wandering Flemish refugees during the sixteenth century were responsible for spreading the woven gospel of Flanders to many countries from England to Italy. It will be remembered how Gustav Vasa invited and encouraged Flemish weavers to come to Sweden. Although the technique quickly adapted itself to individual countries' cultures and traditions, it nonetheless was responsible for a spirit of internationalism and closer affinity between tapestry weavers from a number of European countries.

Similarly associations formed in late nineteenth century Sweden (to combat a destiny of extinction for folk art, forecast by industrialism). They may be said to parallel those initiated by William Morris in England, and Gerhard Munthe and Frida Hansen in Norway. Further afield, a Latin - American revival of indigenous folk-craft aroused interest in tapestry making in Mexico and Panama. In fact, South American centres of tapestry art developed in Brazil, Chile and Colombia.

In the last twenty years, a growing interest of a worldwide nature has taken place in tapestry and in weaving in general. Perhaps the growing affinity of the weaver with the painter has meant that tapestry has returned to being more an art rather than handicraft form. Comparisons and hints of the influence of contemporary painters may be seen in the works of specific tapestry weavers. In the case of Elisabet Hasselberg-Olsson one can make comparisons with Magritte, his surrealism being echoed in her work (for example "Gryning" display this).

It must be remembered, moreover, that the sixties initiated an era which was infiltrated by a growing interest in technology.



Evidence of this exists in the pop art of the decade whereupon artists were to express the mental preoccupations of a technological civilization, keeping in harmony with its typical architecture. The influences of pop art can be strongly envisaged in the work of Helena Hermarck notably "Newspapers" and "American as Apple Pie" (the latter displaying a possible hint of the work of Andy Warhol and his "Campbell's Soup Tins"). Both her works and the works of Sandra Jkse - Bergman, bear a comparsion to realism, that is photorealism in painting as exemplified by "Liberation".

Altogether, although tapestry in Sweden, is of a unique nature expressing the culture and tradition of the country, it must be realised that this development could not reach fruition in isolation - that is to say that Sweden has always preserved strong links with the continent both, historically and even to a greater extent of late. It is not surprising therefore, that the past twenty years have produced tapestries (in Sweden) of extremely high repute and of an international parallel.



FOOTNOTES.

<sup>1</sup> Bjorn Hongen; Study of Oseberg pictorial textiles.

<sup>2</sup> Katja Walden: tre temperament i vav catalogue for  
tapestry exhibition held 1976 Stockholm Sweden.

<sup>3</sup> Katja Walden: tre temperament i vav catalogue for  
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