Textile Art and the Avant-garde

40 years ago have already passed since the resurgence of the visual arts in the early sixties. Anyone who experienced this period preceding the 1968 revolution will still remember it as an extraordinary period. Even now it arouses great feelings of joy among those who witnessed it close-up. This resurgence took place in all the fields of the visual arts: Pop Art was born, accompanied by a new canon of painting. Nouveau Réalisme also emerged at this time. Jean Tinguely set a visible signal for everyone to see: in 1960 he had a sculpture destroy itself in the courtyard of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. This departure for a new artistic direction also pulled the Applied Arts in its wake, previously never regarded as an independent art form, but quite prepared to embark on new, untraditional forms and material concepts. This fundamental renewal was particularly striking in tapestry, the subject of this text. The artists of the Association Pierre Pauli collection helped to make this resurgence, this revolution possible. Some of them were the artists of the very first hour. They lend the collection its significance and eminent rank on the scale of contemporary textile collections, of which there are none too many in Europe.

It is fascinating to observe this new consciousness developing in two different countries, in two continents, on both sides of the Atlantic: Poland and the USA. The course followed is parallel, and yet not interrelated. At that time there was no global network. Lausanne and its tapestry Biennial eventually became the meeting point for these new trends and for a decade the most interesting hub of a wall tapestry revolution, which for centuries had been characterized by pictorial tapestries intended to decorate interiors. Even the name changed. Over the decades tapestry as such completely disappeared from the scene. Now new terms were sought. The English-speaking countries came up with ‘Art Fabric’ or ‘Fiber Art’, an appropriate designation of what artists created with and without a loom, with textile materials and at times with paper and horse-hair. In Europe we began to agree on the term ‘textile art’. Back in 1964 I called the first exhibition from the USA featuring Lenore Tawney, Sheila Hicks and Claire Zeisler at the Kunstgewerbemuseum in Zurich Gewebte Formen (Woven Forms).
Today, over 30 years later, the new handicraft-artistic movement could also be seen as a contribution to object art – textile objects. This direction was in fact the strongest pursued, climaxing in textile environments. Developments in tapestry were so fundamentally different, so new that these changes should be recalled in a few key words. Perhaps one of the main points of departure was that the new weavers no longer created designs for the purpose of later manufacture. They themselves wove their creations in their own, sometimes small, even tiny ateliers. They acquired all the techniques of the textile craft, expressed not only in the weave itself but also in the many opportunities offered by weaving. They themselves dyed the thread they used. They searched for expressive materials suitable for their textile craft. Sisal topped the list, followed by cord and string, animal hair, even materials over the years that originally had nothing to do with textile art, such as paper, rubber and leather. They handled these materials like textile artists, subjecting them to the laws of textile works. They let themselves be inspired by them. They broached a creative dialogue with the material and the abundance of techniques that came their way, a dialogue they also engaged with the past – with the old cultures of the Indios, the masters of textile handicraft, with European folkloric art. During this period quilts are perceived as an art form for the first time in the USA. 1972 saw the first traveling exhibition of the Navajo Indians' blankets in America. The time was ripe to accept the ancient textile handicraft as a people's aesthetic, creative expression. Delving into the opulent textile past of various civilizations, artists discover long-forgotten textile works, hardly ever regarded as an aesthetic art form in their formal power of expression, their infinite abundance of techniques; they begin to develop their own textile art for today. This process reveals certain parallels to the discovery of the art of black Africa by the expressionists and of course by Picasso and Cubism.

Two women artists played a major role in the infancy of contemporary textile art, not only providing it with the dynamic verve of their creative talent but also shifting it from the outset beyond craft, beyond the decorative aspect of its purpose: Lenore Tawney in New York and Magdalena Abakanowicz in Warsaw. It is certainly no accident that the two artists did part of their training in sculptors' ateliers, which allowed them to introduce their knowledge and experience of volume and their three-dimensional perception of space to textile art. Lenore Tawney was a pupil of Archipenko, Magdalena Abakanowicz a pupil of the Art Academy in Warsaw, where she was trained in the field of visual arts. In 1960 Pierre Pauli discovered the weaver artist in her little atelier in Warsaw. Magdalena Abakanowicz went on to become one of the main personalities at the Lausanne Biennial. Her development is phenomenal. At every Biennial she produces a number of surprises in her new structures. She turns the time-honored wall tapestry into a sisal relief, also woven but by no means a wall tapestry in the traditional sense, and by no means a support for a picture. But the man-made structures are exposed, the material joins in the design process. This is something completely new.
Weaving sisal seems virtually impossible at first sight. But Magdalena Abakanowicz shows us how to do it! She uses slit weaving – the ancient craft in folkloric art, and as we shall see later in the works of the Americans, of ancient Peru. Sisal threads hang out of the slits, giving the ensemble a feeling of vivacity and movement. This structure changes very fast. It assumes round, oval silhouettes. It no longer seems adherent to anything else. It hangs free in space. It is no longer a wall tapestry; now it is a plastic form spreading out, invading the space around it. Magdalena has no real term to describe this structure. She simply calls it Abakan – since no one before her had ever created such a textile form. One cannot help thinking of Man Ray's Rayograms and Christian Schad's Schadographs – inventions in the field of photography one could not find a name for, with the result that these photograms received the names of their inventors.

But Magdalena does not stop at her ‘Abakans’. Her plastic talent leads her on to new forms of expression. Her interest focuses on the element in the series. This is in tune with the zeitgeist. Piero Manzoni was the first artist to introduce this element into his work – into a work preferably made from soft materials, from felt, cotton, wool, glass-fiber wool. Another example is Eva Hesse, who, in the same two decades, uses repetitions of forms in series, the basis of the work. Magdalena Abakanowicz created four cycles, born of the spirit of the series, with the umbrella title of Alterations: Heads (1973-1975), Seated Figures (1974-1979), Backs (1976-1982), Embryology (1978-1981). In these works she abandons the Abakans. She no longer weaves, but uses ready material: burlap sacking. The Heads consist of jute sacks filled with sisal and string whose seams differ, so that every head assumes an individual shape, although all together they form a large group. In the later series she works with life-size figures for the first time. She takes plaster casts of a body, but only uses a fragment in order to achieve abstraction, to avoid any form of representation. At the same time the figures assume the expression of something unfinished, of the non finito, whose decisive role is to determine the content of the work. Technically she invents a combination: she glues pieces of burlap onto the plaster casts. She mixes jute and glue into a solid mass, which is then removed from the plaster cast and reassembled. A textile sculpture is born. Today Magdalena Abakanowicz works with bronze. She has found her way to sculpture. But she had to pass via Abakans and stuffed jute sacks. She had to grope her way forward to hard bronze via her experience with soft, moldable materials to arrive at the organic expression of what cannot be bent or pressed. Her work is represented in the Foundation collection with one Abakan, testifying to a development that for two decades achieved inconceivable expressiveness in her work, creations of individual versatility and variety by a singularly imaginative and talented artist.

Lenore Tawney is the counterpart to Magdalena Abakanowicz, and yet of equal importance in the developing ‘Fiber Art’. Her oeuvre has nothing in common with the traditional concept of the wall tapestry. Her works are transparent weaves, monumental both in concept and format.
beginning she no longer uses the wall. Her weaves from black and white yarns hang freely in space, defining it by means of a network of threads and exposed warps. They are extremely light and shimmering brightly, translucent and yet creating a textile, architectural form. This is unprecedented. This represents a completely new direction in textile craft. Lenore Tawney has never been tied to handicraft. Her works profited from an artistic impetus from the outset. They were always sculptural weaves of incredible tenderness. Only in the bygone days of a past civilization can one find any parallel: in Peru, where gauze weaves were made in pre-Columbian times. They inspired Lenore Tawney to apply them to a new textile design. She herself describes how this technique fascinated her: “I used the Peruvian technique of the gauze weave for many of my fiber sculptures: the threads span crisscross the entire loom. This is done by hand. When you travel back, all the threads jump into their usual direction. Then you cross every single thread again and repeat the same process again and again.” The result was one of utmost translucence, imparting to the weave its unique lightness. Every one of her works is thus endowed with a sculptural character. This also applies when she creates such an object exclusively from hanging warps, as in a work made in 1963, Lekythos. Is there anything more transparent? The experiences she gained from these works led to her first environment oeuvre ten years later, which she calls Cloud”, later followed by several other Clouds. In Clouds she achieved her goal: the space is dissolved into translucent, airy threads. It is a space which exists for itself. Lenore Tawney presented her Clouds installation at the Soft Art exhibition at the Zurich Kunsthau in 1980. She created it in situ. Thirteen thousand threads slipped through her hands. Every single thread had been dyed by herself. It was a work process in which she had to banish time from her mind, since the work seemed to have no end. Her many years of experiences in Asia bore fruit. The work was in fact a process of meditation. “It isn't patience. I don't go about it patiently. I love this kind of work. I work with dedication. It is simply work.” Her work in the Pauli collection also stems from the Clouds period. A small, transparent thread-space construction, in which space – nothingness – reveals itself as a result of the most delicate possible structure, that of a fine thread. Air – equally invisible – now receives a face. Lenore Tawney is one of the few artists who has succeeded in finding a way from weaving to free art. Her pioneer work in the early sixties in the USA reflected in these woven objects provided a fresh impulse for the artists seeking a contemporary approach to wall tapestry.

The Abakans and Clouds seem to be worlds apart. The finest thread and the coarsest sisal are the media for these new opportunities. The textile experiments of the sixties and seventies are conducted in this domain until Japanese artists finally discover a new variant of textile object art. More later. A group of Polish artists, as well as artists from Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, gather around Magdalena Abakanowicz. It is hardly surprising that such a large number of artists in
Poland advance towards this new form of expression, very soon forming a movement. It is a country where a very rich tradition of folkloric art had survived, especially in the field of wall tapestry and blankets. The artists drew their inspiration from this tradition. This modern trend was full of life and movement at that time. After the experiences of the war period, when everything had been reduced to rubble, the artists were ready and willing to start anew. The remnants of tradition were seen through the experiences of the war years. They were well aware of the traditions, but they wished to change them, to head for a completely different climate or spirit. The most convincing examples of this attitude will always be the play director and painter Tadeusz Kantor. The mood of radical change was a driving force for the arts in this field, too. On the first few occasions of the Lausanne Biennial the Polish weavers were the real sensation; it is no coincidence that, expressed as a percentage, most of the artists in the collection of the Pauli Foundation are Polish. Pierre Pauli had every reason back then to concentrate his journeys on Poland. The first Biennials were dominated by the central and eastern European countries Poland, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. Wool and sisal were triumphant. The material and the technique became the real media of expression. The pictorial tapestry, which had focused on a picture and had been woven according to a cartoon, had no chance of survival. The Gobelin high warp technique (haute lisse) withdrew further into the background. In Poland Maria Łaszkiewicz, the doyenne of the new weaving art, searches for a link between a figurative content and expressive material. Using the high warp technique she weaves heavy woolen bands on small looms, joins them to form a figure and applies hands made of wood. The result is a female figure called Solitude. This woven figure has a very clear sculptural character. Maria Łaszkiewicz was the teacher not only of Magdalena Abakanowicz, but of most Polish weavers. Her serious, content-related works are developed further by the Polish artists in the direction of a free material and technical approach. One of the most adventurous was Wojciech Sadley. He was not content to stop at wool and sisal. He went on to use goat hair and fur in his weaves; metal chains nestled there, too. Little pieces of wood were applied. Weaving is joined by other techniques: plaits of goat hair, nets capturing balls of thread. Everything imaginable is used to attain a variety of different focal points. Sadley clearly attempts to examine textile craft material to discover its plastic effectiveness. He and Magdalena Abakanowicz rank among the most creative artists in the Polish textile art scene. From the East of Europe comes another equally talented artist in these first years of artistic revolution: Jagoda Buić from Yugoslavia. As early as 1965 at the 2nd Biennial she presents her monumental room weavings, woven in sisal in her favorite color black, extraordinarily dramatic in appearance. Her contribution towards the emergence of a contemporary textile art cannot be esteemed highly enough. Her sisal weaves have an architectonic character from the very beginning. When the wall serves as their support, they have a relief effect. Placed in the room, the different pieces form a woven wall, so strong in effect that they seem to provide shelter, like a fortress.
Together with Magdalena Abakanowicz, she is the artist who, in the seventies, is to transpose textile art into an environmental form. For her, structure is the basis of the artistic design, which she also sketches to gain a deep insight into structural possibilities offered by the combination of various techniques. The autonomy of the weave is her main priority. This becomes the predominant element in the room. The dramatic aspect of these environments and sculptural objects – as clearly revealed by her oeuvre in the collection – paved the way to the theater world. Her next activity centered on stage set design; she designed the costumes for the Hamlet production at the Dubrovnik Theatre Festival in 1975. ‘Fiber Art’ knows no boundaries, it provides undreamed-of opportunities.

While the countries in Central and Eastern Europe progress towards a renewal of the art of weaving from within, we witness a similar process in the USA. Together with Lenore Tawney a whole generation of textile artists arrive who, with their new ideas of form, banish the traditional wall tapestry. Two of the first weavers to gain international fame are Sheila Hicks and the Chicago artist Claire Zeisler. These artists are not represented in the collection, but their contribution to contemporary textile art is of decisive importance and has to be included in the historical outline we have ventured on. The two artists are joined by a common point of departure, although the results are quite different: the weaving of the Indios. Both take an interest in researching and experimenting with old techniques. Claire Zeisler scrutinized the magnificent collection of old American textiles at the Art Institute of Chicago. When the Institute exhibited a retrospective of her works of the previous 16 years in 1979, it became clear to the visitors that here an artist was at work who had created her own new art form from the old techniques. She used the two- or threefold form of weaving, which, when hand-weaving, enabled her to insert a weave as a background by means of two or four shanks. This technique makes it possible to execute the work in several layers. It assumes more volume, and can be viewed from both sides, from the front and rear. It uses the principle of slit weaving, the classical technique in ancient Peru and the oldest of all known weaving styles. The slits replaced the ornament which had been customary up to that time. The weave is structured by these slits. The à jour weave of the Chancay civilization inspired her. And naturally she worked with exposed, untouched warps. Like Sadley she sometimes wove into her structures feathers, pieces of metal and wood. She also selected lace, sequins and Christmas-tree balls to liven up the weave and to give the object a mysterious touch. I can still remember very well the protests from the public and in the art reviews when the works were put on exhibition at the Zurich Kunstgewerbemuseum in 1964. The good, old Gobelin with its woven painting imitations was still ingrained in people's minds. The idea that a weave wished to be autonomous and did not want to represent anything else apart from itself was too new to be understood immediately! In her later works Claire Zeisler, like many of her contemporaries, abandoned weaving to work only with threads. Sculptures were to emerge from
threads and cords, whose free hanging constituted the rhythm and vigor of the work. A typical example is her 1969 string sculpture *To Conrad*.

Sheila Hicks wanted to know exactly what the small hand-operated loom could achieve. So she went to the ‘Indios’ themselves. When a pupil of Josef Albers, she had learnt weaving from Annie Albers, who taught her the method of the Bauhaus textile class: justice to the material; harmony of material, design and technique. Back in the Bauhaus days artists tried to restore to the weave its authenticity, virtually destroyed by textile manufacturers down the centuries. Sheila Hicks went to Taxco in Mexico after her training, where she worked with ‘Indios’. She built an atelier with them. The weaving was performed on small, simple looms, known in Peru for almost 2000 years and used by the ‘Indios’ in the whole of Latin America to this very day. In these first works, exhibited in Zurich back then, she applied slit weaving as the structure. She displayed the technique, making it the main element of the weave. Sheila was less interested in the three-dimensionality of the object; she endeavoured to define its relationship with the wall. Her works were therefore quite classical in nature – but under new conditions. She was one of the first weavers to introduce to modern textile art the ‘wrapping’, i.e. the wrapping of threads and tubes – a technique she had learnt during her stay with the ‘Indios’. She made a whole wall of such wrapped threads in the most radiant and brilliant colors for the Sheraton Hotel in Saint Louis in 1979. She loved fringes and so she let the warps trail down.

The new, unexpected works of these two artists were a constant source of surprise at the Biennials, they were the main events of the occasion: for example Zeisler’s red balls, which evoked a floor sculpture, or Sheila’s piled-up cloths in 1977 – a conceptual work symbolizing the greatest possible distance from tapestry. That is what they had all done – Magdalena Abakanowicz, for instance, in her unforgettable work in 1973, when she ran a thick rope through the halls of the Biennial, demonstrating nothing but an awareness of space and time: *La Corde, ses Pénétrations, sa Situation dans l’Espace*.

A Swiss artist also contributed to the autonomy of textile as an art form in its own right: Elsi Giauque, over a generation older than the upholsters of the “avant-garde” but still quite definitely one of the initiators of the new trends. She was a pupil of Sophie Taeuber-Arp, took part in Dada events in Zurich as a young pupil, and was the head of the textile class at the Kunstgewerbeschule (School of Applice Art) between 1944 and 1966. Sophie Taeuber, one of the pioneers heading for concrete-abstract painting, had already sought for new ways in textile art during her years in Zurich. Using a cross-stitch technique, she made pillow-covers, evening-bags with pearl embroidery, devoid of and
beyond any commercial art or tawdry cliché. Her decor was structured according to an abstract, geometrical plan, quite capable of joining the company of her painting without any devaluation in quality. From these textile works developed from focusing on pure form Elsi Giauque learnt and developed a passion for an aesthetic approach towards materials and techniques. She also recognized the significance of the right color setting, which became intense and unusual in her simplification of the means. She dedicated herself to the transparency of a weaving. She aimed for complete transparency and airiness. It was from her that we all, artists and theoreticians, learnt that the name for what she did was not textile art but purely and simply 'textile'. As early as in 1945 she had made a weave suspended in space, using the simplest of materials and applying pieces of wood, in addition to a partition element made of cord, string and corn leaves implanted in the weave. These were genuine inventions - but no one had taken any notice of them then. She was simply 20 years ahead of her time. Even then, 20 years before the launch of a new textile art, she had questioned the wall tapestry and dethroned the Gobelin before its renaissance came about via Jean Lurçat in Aubusson. Not until the radical changes of the early sixties did these works receive any real attention. Not until 1971 were they exhibited for the first time in public, in the annex of the Kunsthgewerbemuseum in Zurich, the Bellerive Museum. Elsi Giauque's never-tiring, alert spirit was caught up in the wake of her impressions of the dynamic, stormy development undergone by textile art in the sixties and seventies. During these years she devoted herself to textiles with the passion we generally encounter only in (59) younger years. Her works became more transparent and wallowed in color. She worked almost solely with unconnected, but at the same time attached warps. Quite frequently basic forms are woven into these thread planes: circles, triangles, ovals, memories of her distant youth, when she was Sophie Taeuber's pupil. She makes columns of various heights - objects hanging in space or standing on the floor and growing like plants. When she exhibits Elément spatial at the Biennial in 1969 - a construction of threads, with more and more threads as the background, constituting a model of transparency, everyone feels that in this case the experiments of a whole lifetime have led to her goal: Elsi Giauque has accomplished the perfect transparency of a weave.

There is no doubt that the Lausanne Biennial whetted the appetite of artists all over the world to experiment and during the sixties and seventies the Lausanne event was the meeting point and the melting pot of textile art. Every Biennial meant a special event, the discovery of a new artist, the revelation of new opportunities in technique and material. Besides American and eastern European artists, led by Poland and Yugoslavia due to the trailblazing work of Jagoda Buić, new names were discovered that later entered the annals of textile design. A striking exhibit at the second Biennial was the Spanish artist Aurelia Muñoz's work Abstraction constructive. She was to become one of the most important artists at the following Biennials. Although she set great store by the development of
the weave’s surface structure, she soon confidently approaches textile sculpture. In 1972 she exhibits *Personnages* made with the macramé technique believed to be long forgotten. Sisal has also become the most interesting material for her. The work in the collection, which she calls *Capa pluvial II*, is a fine example of how she uses material and technique. At this second Biennial the Dutch artist Hermann Scholten also created quite a stir with a weave made of crossed bands. A third work struck the eye of the jury and the public: the Colombian Olga de Amaral's tapestry of 1981 that embodies her entire oeuvre. Olga de Amaral always remained loyal to the wall, so we may refer to her works as wall tapestries. Back in 1955 she started up a small atelier business, working on small looms, the like of which she had seen in the Indio tribes of her homeland. These looms were no wider than about 24 cm. (8 ins.) or even smaller. In the USA these works created on small looms are known as *Narrow Fabrics*. She wove them on these small looms, using plaits and a whole variety of techniques, many her own personal approaches. Each of her wall hangings bears her unmistakable signature. She works with soft materials, linen, wool, cotton. She uses natural dyes. Sometimes she may even color the threads with plain chalk. The surface structure achieved constitutes complete harmony between technique, material and color.

An artist couple that had recently left their home country participated in the Lausanne Biennial in 1971 for the first time: Ritzi and Peter Jacobi from Romania. They exhibited an unusual work that had nothing in common with developing trends. It comprised self-woven garments, hanging from clothes hangers on an iron construction. They called the installation *Armoire*. What had been the reason for the artists to base their artistic conception on something that seemed to have been taken direct from reality? Both felt deep down the great culture shock they had experienced when arriving from the East in the western art sphere; they had to start anew. They had to cast off all their academic education. But amidst all the consumption and luxury of the western world they became aware of their rural tradition, of the countryside of the homeland left behind, still virtually unspoiled. Their new beginning was a work dedicated to the memory of the country they had come from: Transylvania. The jackets in the *Armoire* were woven from goat hair. They were a symbolic tribute to the peasants of Transylvania. Half a century before, one of the greatest sculptors of the 20th Century, Constantin Brancusi, an emigrant like themselves, had also come to grips with the rural traditions of his Romanian homeland while in foreign parts. In the middle of Paris he worked on his *Colonne sans fin*, composing its elements like the parts of a garden fence as found in Romanian villages still today. For the Jacobis the memory of Transylvania became the essential theme of their joint textile oeuvre. *Armoire* was the first attempt and was not repeated in this form. It was the experiment that freed them of what they had learnt before, what they had adapted to as a matter of course. And it was an artwork situated between textile art and object art. What is more, it had a
message. In the final analysis, it was comparable to a work by Joseph Beuys, who just one year before had issued his Filzanzug (Felt Suit) as a multiple in an edition of 100 pieces. But its message stretches further. Just as the Jacobis’ jackets are not meant to be worn, Beuys’ felt jacket is not a piece of clothing to be donned, either, nor is it intended as a possible guise for identifying with the artist. For Beuys it was a ‘symbol of man’s isolation in our age’. In the following years the Jacobis accomplished an impressive memorial oeuvre of Transylvania, a perfect artistic manifestation of their ideas. Peter Jacobi had graduated as a sculptor in Bucharest, Ritzi in graphics and drawing. She began to draw on layers of rice paper. The result was her highly original Soft drawings. Ritzi and Peter intelligently combined their mutual talents to create the unique work they called Transilvania. It was a profoundly new form of tapestry. They did not search for the environment, the textile in space, but still used the wall as the classical tapestry foundation. But what happened on the wall was so totally different that it could be described as a renaissance of the Gobelin in contemporary style. The classical Gobelin weave was combined with soft drawing and animal hair applications - mainly goat hair, but also horse hair occasionally - and flax. The drawings matched the richness of movement of these materials across the surface of the principally smooth weave, rendering the latter purely functional: its only role was that of a supportive base. It was like the canvas on which the painting is performed. And yet the woven base does not always remain parallel to the wall, it is not always flat. It was draped and deformed. Sometimes the drawings also exchanged roles with the weave base, emerging as the background the tapestry moved across dramatically. The series of Transilvania works is one of the most artistic to have evolved in these years of constantly expanding, experimental textile art. It turned textile art into a medium of significance, which in another vision Magdalena Abakanowicz equally contributed towards with the invention of her Abakans. The cycle on Transilvania, which lasted for many years, was an evocative confrontation with their Romanian heritage. The memory of something sublimates the impressions experienced. They had left behind Transylvania - the land in the middle of nowhere - an ‘intact world’, a lost Paradise, which exists in all of us. But their works provide new stimuli for the textile arts directly, for example the use of goat hair as a textile material. Until this very day clothes, tents and bags are made from goat hair in the Carpathians. In the case of the Jacobis a useful quality is turned into an aesthetic quality. They have transformed it into a highly expressive design element.

The material! During these years it became the most important means of expression, assuming an infinite number of different aspects. The transparency of Elsi Giauque’s and Lenore Tawney’s threads, brittle, robust sisal, anti-textile materials such as ropes, knits and rubber tubes - they all simultaneously inspired the experimental artists, achieving - possibly for the very first time in the history of textile art - autonomy. In 1973 when Magdalena Abakanowicz extended her legendary
rope through the rooms of the Biennial, it was the first work in which the ‘material itself’ took charge of the message. The experience she had gathered in 1970 in the *Environnement* and the *Improvisation des cordes*, where the rope itself was the work, culminated in the Lausanne exhibit. From now on it is an established part of textile art. Françoise Grossen, a young Swiss artist in New York, plaided ropes to form sculptures, hanging them knotted in space. She consistently went for materials previously never conceived as being at all suitable for artistic creation. In 1973 she took some rubber tubes and plaided them to create a sculpture in macramé, which slid down the wall into the room. Her sculptural work in the collection also has little to do with the term ‘textile’. Hemp ropes are twisted into plaids and partly knotted. She positions the product on a column to give it the status of a sculpture. Nothing is woven here. The plaiding of cords is the acknowledged feature and is staged as such. What had given her the courage to use these materials and techniques was the work of a young artist, who introduced herself to the art world with an admirable self-image, employing the most unusual soft materials. Her name was Eva Hesse (1936-1970). In the sixties the artist, who died at a very early age, worked with every possible kind of synthetic material, with nets, rubber, string, cord, fiber-glass and latex. ‘Soft materials’ were her choice, which she used to create her fragile sculptures. Eva Hesse's influence on a whole generation of artists is indisputable. Françoise Grossen, not even ten years younger, is one of them. Eva Hesse (62) was perhaps the only artist during the sixties to create a parallel to the development in textile art with her soft sculptures, playing an even greater role than the felt works by Robert Morris or Richard Serra.

Let us return to the rope, an artistic challenge for so many artists. A rope has a will of its own. It is not as flexible as thread or yarn. It is extremely difficult to process, giving the artist hardly any chance to work on it. Perhaps for this very reason it became the material from which the sculpture evolved. The artists were obliged to accept and respect its rigidity and hardness. Jackie Windsor made a circle out of it. The Japanese artist Mariyō Yagi erected it straight upwards into space by means of an aluminum rod.

This free, autonomous handling of materials and techniques inspired the artists to venture on to three-dimensional objects. Some drew on wickerwork and other folkloric art traditions, even the Peruvian mummy wrapping of the pre-Columbian age. In the seventies boxes and baskets were made of soft materials. The predecessor of these works had been Eva Hesse and her boxes, made of tiny rubber tubes - her own manufacture - in the late sixties. They set a new trend in contemporary sculpture. Textile art was certainly enriched by the three-dimensional small - and voluminous - vessel forms. In the collection this new branch of textile works is represented by the Canadian Michelle Heon and the American artists Lillian Elliott and Patricia Hickman. The material would no longer be
identifiable as thread. Dominic de Mare, for example, created his objects with paper he made himself and subsequently painted. Felt, being easy to ply and fold, was a natural choice of material. Fine wooden constructions served to emphasize a ‘vessel-like’ or ‘box-like’ character. The works, reminiscent of everyday utensils, were of course not intended for use but were objects with a decorative purpose and designed for contemplation. Some of these three-dimensional objects also featured absolutely classical techniques. One example is the work Basket with Brown Lines created in 1977 by the Japanese artist living in the USA, Kay Sekimachi: the individual parts of the ‘basket’ were woven on a conventional loom. With an astonishing result! The Japanese were responsible for introducing the most amazing ideas since the seventies and giving textile art another fantastic boost.

The Japanese set an unexpected new trend in the world of thread. One of the astonishing designs for a new direction in textile art they had repeatedly produced since the early seventies was the monumental sculpture. Yōichi Onagui started this trend in 1973 with his The Nude Bride - a red-glowing 2.75 meter (9 ft.) hanging sculpture of circular woven (tissage tubulaire) capsules, all suspended from a large woven central part. Even more impressive, however, was his work in 1975, The Red Glove, executed in cotton, in high warp. It was a monumental sculptural woven hand. Its size and again its red-glowing color, only disrupted by the incarnadine hue of its finger nails, made it seem gigantic. It was positioned to allow the visitors to pass underneath. Technically, it was a superb weaving achievement and a revolutionary innovation. They all produced such works: Masakazu Kobayashi, Naomi Kobayashi, Akiko Sato, just to name a few among a host of Japanese artists. Japan is represented with several works in the collection. One outstanding example is Dark of the Valley by Naomi Kobayashi, an attraction at the 1979 Biennial. A floor exhibit consisting of four parts made of black cotton thread. An object between architecture and sculpture, between soft art and construction. But just how dominant the Japanese were in producing thread structures is apparent in the works by Masakazu Kobayashi. His woven Waves in dyed threads rank among the most perfect in aesthetic effectiveness ever produced by contemporary weaving. They are the Japanese counterpart of Lenore Tawney's Clouds. This Japanese way of conjuring up such transparency with threads, of perceiving the thread itself as something creative is highly artistic. They celebrate aesthetic beauty in a way no one can elude.

Virtually all the Japanese worked with large spatial weaves. They belong to a new concept which has long been known as the ‘environment’ in contemporary art; during the seventies textile artists also succumbed to its fascination. This aspect of the ‘environment’ is included in the collection as a version of Lenore Tawney's Clouds. The graceful work made of organza by the Japanese artist Machiko Agano also comes under the ‘environment’ category. As the rooms of the Musée des Beaux
Arts in Lausanne, which housed the Biennials, provided an ideal setting for these large-format works, this museum became the location for demonstratively presenting this most recent and turbulent development in textile art. Two names are very closely linked to the latter: Gerhardt Knodel from the USA and Daniel Graffin from France. Both worked primarily with the expressiveness of the thread. Threads determined the individual fragile constructions. Sometimes they were thread architectures. Who does not remember the Entracte installation in 1983 by Gerhardt Knodel? One of the rooms was completely occupied by this thread environment, dramatically illuminated by light effects. The visitors walked through between the lengths of thread. Were they threads in a room - or was it a room defined by threads? These installations were like the climax of a development which apparently could not progress any further. They were the highlight at the end of a dynamic change that had lasted a quarter of a century.

What had happened to the actual wall tapestry all those years? Did it still exist? Many artists had continued to take an active interest in the wall tapestry. In this connection I once again recall the admirable achievement of Olga de Amaral, who during all these wild years of creative reflection on contemporary textile art had pursued her virtually ‘classical’ work. The elaboration of a ‘woven structure’, as pursued by the Bauhaus, had never disappeared from sight. An artist like the Dutchman Hermann Scholten had consistently followed this course. The Japanese were always good for a surprise; the wall and the textile merged in unison in Shigeo Kubota’s and Masao Yoshimura’s transparent weaves parallel to the wall. The wall was the weave and the textile weave the wall. The genuine ‘pictorial tapestry’ became more of a rarity, and the attempts to preserve it generally failed. One convincing example of suitable adaptation is the tapestry by Mariette Rousseau-Vermette in the Collection: Cet arbre vivra-t-il ?, 1975. This woolen tapestry was made according to an old Scandinavian technique; its surface features slight nuances of color and an abstract line suggesting the tree. The ‘pictorial’ aspect is reduced to a minimum, and yet it imparts to the surface its pictorial emphasis. In this connection the question may still be interesting as to what has become of old handicraft textile techniques in this period of radical change. At the beginning we saw that ancient techniques such as those practiced by the Indios in Peru had been indispensable for a fresh review of this ancient handicraft. In the collection there are two works whose technique is described as ‘embroidery’. Indeed, quite a few old handicraft techniques have managed to keep alive in contemporary textile art. Crochet work did not disappear from the scene, neither did knitting. They were mainly applied in miniatures, but were in fact intended as a statement: that even with so many non-established techniques of deprecated ‘handicraft’ it was still possible to discover new forms. This also applies to ‘embroidery’, represented in the collection by two Swiss, Lissy Funk and Liselotte Siegfried. This is certainly not a coincidence, for Switzerland is renowned in haute couture for its St.
Gallen embroidery to this very day. One artist who used this old technique gained international fame: Luba Krejci from Prague. She had rediscovered lace and made little figurative pictures emerging from the weave of extremely thin, delicate threads. She followed that old law adhered to by all artists - regardless of whether they are tackling a monumental format or specializing in miniatures: they respected the thread, the weave as artistic material. No material, no technique was too insignificant to be examined anew and adapted to individual intentions.

Reviewing from today's perspective the proposals artists reserved for textiles, we cannot fail to be amazed by the enormous variety that shaped art and artists across the USA, Europe and Japan. Never before have there been so many individual artists in artistic handicraft. The renewal of tapestry invoked the advent of the 'textile artist': a new profession with high artistic ambitions evolved. Its creations were admitted to the magic circle we are accustomed to calling 'visual art'. One of the most recent phenomena in its constantly expanding, constantly changing appearance is textile art. There is no other way of putting it: the dynamism with which it established itself immediately guaranteed it a forum - the Biennial of Lausanne!

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