

Lausanne Tapestry Biennial

Nomad Tapestries 2016



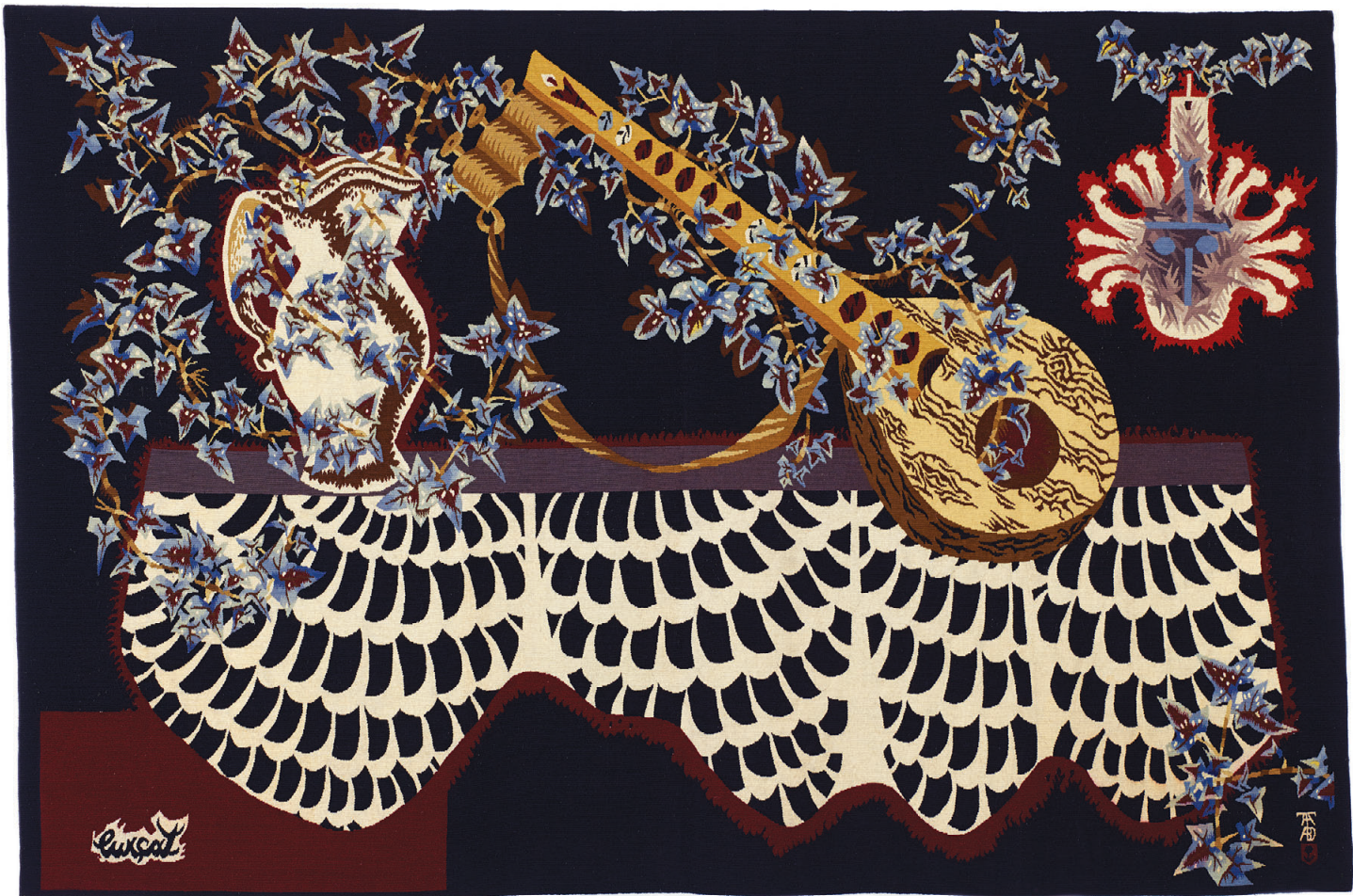
Palais de Rumine, former venue of the famed Lausanne Tapestry Biennial, housed the exhibition *Tapisseries Nomades (Nomad Tapestries)* from March 25th to May 29th this year, drawing on the Toms Pauli Foundation 20th Century Collection. The *Biennial* had access to the beautiful Palais in 1992; now **Bernard Fibicher**, the current director of the **Lausanne Cantonal Museum of Fine Art**, invited the *Biennial* successor—Toms Pauli Foundation—to present its collection of contemporary art. The exhibition title relates to a comment on the role of art and tapestry made in 1960 by renowned French architect, artist and designer **Le Corbusier**, in which he pointed out the necessary complementarity between tapestry and architecture in his day.¹

In the new millennium, the international fine art scene has been increasingly interested in textile art, to the point that textile works accounted for almost a third of the exhibits presented at recent *Venice Biennials*. This has also been noted at art fairs and major art exhibitions. The reason usually given is that tactile qualities take on greater significance in our digitized world. Moreover, they emphasize social relationships that

are easily visualized by means of textile media.

In 2000, when the Pierre Pauli Association merged with the Toms Foundation (with its focus on historic tapestries) to form the Toms Pauli Foundation, the collection of modern textile art comprised 46 items. It currently has more than 200. Its works—many from the collection of **Pierre and Marguerite Magnenat** and **Alice Pauli**, compiled from donations and purchases—are now owned by the **Canton of Vaud**. The 2016 exhibition was undoubtedly a highlight in the history of the Foundation.

The Foundation, with no exhibition space of its own, did not intend to present a complete retrospective of the *Biennials*, but rather to make its collection known to the public. The exhibition showcased 38 pieces from the Foundation's collection by artists who exhibited at one of the 16 *Biennials*, which began in 1962. The organizers of this exhibition aimed to illustrate the efforts of the **New Tapestry** pioneers, such as **Jean Lurçat**, **Magdalena Abakanowicz**, **Jagoda Buić**, **Olga de Amaral**, **Elsi Giaque**, and **Machiko Agano**. The show began by presenting works created during the 1960s (Lurçat, Delaunay, Grau-Garriga). Most of



ABOVE: JEAN LURÇAT (France) *Mexico* Wool, tapestry, 59.4" x 90.9", 1954. Collection and photo: Fondation Toms Pauli, Lausanne.
 LEFT: View of the exhibition *Tapisseries Nomades* at Lausanne Cantonal Museum of Fine Art, Palais de Rumine, Lausanne, Switzerland, 2016.
 Center on pedestal: FRANÇOISE GROSSEN (Switzerland / US) *Cénotaphe* Manila hemp, tapestry techniques, 9.8" x 106.2" x 17.7", 1977.
 Collection Fondation Toms Pauli, Lausanne. Photo: Beatrijs Sterk.

them woven in wool, they bear witness to the renaissance of wall-based tapestries produced in the major workshops under the influence of Jean Lurçat. They were juxtaposed with works by Eastern European artists, the “new barbarians” who reinvented their medium. Abakanowicz, Łaskiewicz, Sadley, and others produced their own one-off pieces, often employing unusual materials, such as sisal or hemp.

Setting the Stage for a Revolution

The conquest of three-dimensional space began in the late 1960s. Artists increasingly departed from the idea of classical tapestry weaving in favor of 3D structures. In the process, some of them, such as Olga De Amaral, harkened back to the old traditions of their countries. Others, including Buić, Grau-Garriga, and Daquin, abandoned the tapestry technique altogether in compositions that played with open and closed forms.

Items created during the 1970s also display a refinement of textile techniques (Cook, Matter) as well as poetic and symbolic references (Hicks, Giauque, Abakanowicz). From the mid-1970s, an increase in the number of American and Japanese participants resulted in a new aesthetic with artists using every kind of fiber (animal, vegetable, synthetic) in highly inventive ways (Shaw-Sutton, Argano, Tanaka, Sitter-Liver). In the American terminology, textile art morphed into *fiber art*.

An unintentional revolution had taken place—a movement away from wall-based tapestry and towards freeform textile art. It was unintentional because Jean Lurçat, the *Biennial* initiator, considered reproducible tapestries the object of his efforts. He had mixed feelings about the changes that moved tapestry in the direction of fine art. He is reported to have said, “Méfiez-vous des petites filles qui tricotent—Don’t trust those little knitting girls”; referring to the young



LEFT: AURELIA MUÑOZ (Spain) *Capa pluvial II* 98.4" x 78.7", 1976. Photo: Beatrijs Sterk. RIGHT: JAGODA BUIĆ (Croatia) *Flexion II* Wool, sisal, gold metallic wire, tapestry techniques, 64.9" x 33" x 25.1", 1971. Collection and photo: Fondation Toms Pauli, Lausanne.

Eastern European women artists who presented revolutionary one-offs at the *Biennials*.²

This revolution, which American curator and author **Jenelle Porter** dates to the decade from 1962-1972,³ matched the spirit of departure that prevailed during that period, and produced a new women's movement. From the mid-1970s on, however, this spirit of departure was sadly losing its energy, both in the textile revolution and in other social movements. All the same, young female artists received the greatest accolades in the press in the first and subsequent *Biennials*.

Porter believes that **Lenore Tawney's** 1961 solo exhibition at the New York Staten Island Museum constituted the first step in North America, "the point at which Art Fabric was healthfully and joyously launched in America." Oral history interviews conducted with artists like Tawney and **Claire Zeisler**⁴ reveal their motivation. In addition

to a rebellion against their male colleagues, they were inspired by the revolutionary ideas of **Bauhaus** artists who had taken refuge in the US, and by a return to non-Western cultures, such as the great South American art of weaving.

A similar interest in ethnological and folk art developed in Europe, most notably in the former Eastern Bloc countries. Their artists, including applied artists, were generally very well trained. Since political repression imposed restrictions on painters and sculptors, obliging them to toe the party line, the academies' departments of applied art became highly popular with gifted artists eager to experiment. This was the case at the textile department of the **Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts**, where Magdalena Abakanowicz was a student until 1954, and the **Poznan Academy**, where she worked as a professor during the 1960s. She was discovered by **Pierre Pauli**, and invited to



MAGDALENA ABAKANOWICZ (Poland) *Abakan Rouge III* Sisal, tapestry techniques; 118.1" x 118.1" x 17.7", 1970–1971.
Collection and photo: Fondation Toms Pauli, Lausanne.

participate in the first *Lausanne Biennial*. She became the central figure in the new departure that took place in Europe.

The significance of the *Lausanne Biennial*

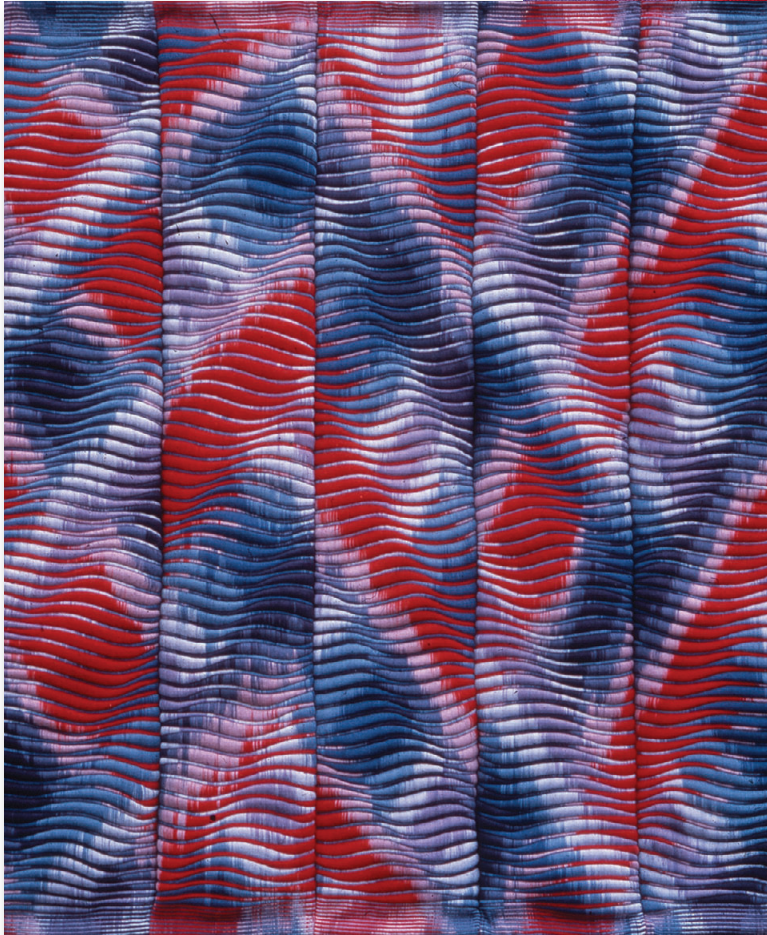
The *Biennial* was initiated by Pierre Pauli, his wife Alice, and the painter Jean Lurçat to envisage a future for classical tapestry weaving. They founded CITAM—the Centre International de la tapisserie ancienne et moderne (International Center for the Promotion of Ancient and Modern Tapestry)—in 1961. The first *Biennial* was held in 1962, and the 16th and last was in 1995. Pauli's achievement was to bring together the best curators and lecturers from European museums and art academies who had expressed an interest in tapestries.

Most of the exhibits presented at the first *Biennial* were reproducible wall-based tapestries designed by well-known painters (**Picasso** and

Le Corbusier) and woven at the major workshops (including **Les Gobelins** and **Aubusson**) in formats of at least 12 square meters.

The focus changed during the course of the first three *Biennials*. Young female artists from Central and Eastern Europe came to the fore; these "tapestry barbarians" presented one-off pieces made by themselves. Art historian **André Kuenzli** wrote, "The Tapestry of Tomorrow has been born in Poland!" much to the chagrin of Jean Lurçat and other classical cartoon painters.

The 4th *Biennial* in 1969 is considered the point at which three-dimensional space was taken over. Artists like Abakanowicz and **Elsi Giauque** liberated their work from the wall, arranging it freely in space. Mostly female artists began to produce their own work around 1970, abandoning cartoons and, in many cases, wool as a material.



LIA COOK (US) *Spatial Ikat II* Wool, jute, polyurethan foam, 120" x 107.8", 1977.



Artists like **Peter and Ritzi Jacobi**, **Sheila Hicks**, **Jagoda Buić**, **Aurèlia Muñoz**, and **Françoise Grossen** created textile sculptures that often employed unusual or new materials.

By early 1971, this new movement could no longer be ignored, resulting in a search for a new name "Nouvelle Tapisserie" in Europe or "Fiber Art" in the US. Various European countries began to organize biennials and triennials, such as the **Polish Triennial** (from 1973-ongoing), the **Dutch Biennial** (1968–1974), the **Nordic Triennial**, the **Szombathély Biennial/Triennial**, and many others. The 8th (1977) and 9th (1979) *Lausanne Biennials* were marked by crises. "Is it still tapestry?" reflected **René Berger**, Vice President of CITAM and director of the Lausanne Museum of Fine Art.

Themes of "Fiber Space," "Textile Sculpture," and "Celebration of the Wall" were set for the 11th, 12th and 13th *Biennials*, respectively. However, the tripartite division did not help to overcome the crisis. In her introduction to the 14th *Biennial* in 1989, **Erika Billeter** wrote "The heroes are worn out... The

revolution of the weaver's art has been over for a long time." In 1995, when the 16th iteration of the show was due, the director of the Museum of Fine Art refused to host the floundering *Biennial*. The new exhibition venues did not attract sufficient numbers of visitors, whereupon the Council of Lausanne, the most important sponsor, decided to discontinue the event and dissolved CITAM.

Personal Reflections

In the 1960s and 1970s, the *Lausanne Tapestry Biennial* constituted a radiant window to the world for us textile students and emerging textile artists. Lausanne was our Mecca. The spirit of departure we experienced during that period showed parallels that, to my mind, were not coincidental, i.e., the equation that "good times for women equal good times for textile art."

The demise of the *Biennial* was foreseeable; some of the later curators were disregarding the specific qualities and advantages offered by textile art, such as the connection with the public. They focused



PIERRE DAQUIN (France) *Devenant* Wool, gold thread, tapestry, 47.2" x 76.7", 1968. Collection Fondation Toms Pauli, Lausanne. Photo: Beatrijs Sterk.

on what was considered fine art to reassess the role of soft pliable textile and fiber material in contemporary art in an effort to get textile art out of its ghetto. It is ironic that the statement "The artists are worn out" was made at the exact time when the new digital weaving revolution began, followed by the revolution of new "smart materials" and techniques, such as 3D printing. An article in *Textile Forum* magazine on the subject is worth reading.⁵

Textile culture should be considered a cultural field in its own right, similar to architecture. An appreciation of textile art in terms of "fine art" only serves to deny those tactile and emotional qualities that now lead mainstream artists to draw inspiration from textile art.

The 2016 *Tapisseries Nomades (Nomad Tapestries)* exhibition was a very positive surprise. Made between 1960-1995, the works still radiate energy and powerful presence. Two examples that immediately come to mind are *Abakan Rouge III* (1970-1971) by Magdalena Abakanowicz and *Spatial Ikat II* (1977) by Lia Cook.

The public was present in large numbers again and was as enthusiastic as during the original *Biennial* events. Asked for new plans in the realm of textile art, both the director of the Fine Art Museum and the Cultural Representative of the State of Vaud were very positive. But they are waiting for the new museum building "Pôle muséal", planned for 2019, where the Toms Pauli Foundation and the Fine Art museum will be in the same building. Curator **Giselle Eberhard Cotton** is planning a detailed catalogue book on the history of the *Lausanne Tapestry Biennial* to be published in 2017. Many images of *Biennial* works are published on their website.⁶



SONIA DELAUNAY (Ukraine/ France) *La Courbe Grise* Wool, tapestry techniques, 53" x 72"; 1970–1972. Collection and photo: Fondation Toms Pauli, Lausanne.

¹Le Corbusier, "Tapisserie muralnomad" in *Zodiac 7*, Milan, 1960.

²Laue, Dietmar, "The International Lausanne Tapestry Biennial 1962–1995", *Textile Forum* 3/2012, p.30–33.

³Porter, Jenelle, "About 10 Years from the New Tapestry to Fiber Arts," *Fiber: Sculpture 1960–Present* catalogue for the exhibition held at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA, US (October 1, 2014–January 4, 2015).

⁴Oral history interview with Claire Zeisler: Archives of American Art. Smithsonian Institution. June 26, 1981, interview with Lenore Tawney. www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews

⁵Sterk, Beatrijs, "Textile Art," in *Textile Forum* 3/2012, pages 34–37.

⁶Toms Pauli Foundation: www.toms-pauli.ch/biennales/historique/.

The exhibition *A Textile Memory: The Lausanne Biennials* will be presented at the Museum A. Sampaio, Guimarães, Portugal (through October 16, 2016) as part of 2016 *Contextile—Contemporary Textile Art Biennial*. The show retraces the evolution of textile art from the 1960s to the 2000s, from classical wall tapestry to textile sculpture. www.contextile.pt/2016 www.toms-pauli.ch

—Beatrijs Sterk is the former editor of *Textile Forum* magazine, and current editor of *Textile Forum* blog. www.textile-forum-blog.org