

**PRAIRIE INTERLACE: WEAVING, MODERNISMS,
AND THE EXPANDED FRAME, 1960-2000**

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Hazel Schwass, *Untitled*, 1974 (cat. 51)

Stand Back—Nothing to See— Move Along

by Jennifer E. Salahub

And you didn't bring your spinning wheel or loom, Mrs. Mooney? Too bad, they would be great treasures in forty years or less. You would be asked to loan them for art exhibits and it would be a great source of interest for the young women to see how you made cloth, and set the patterns.

NELLIE McCLUNG, 1936¹

Western Canada, that is, the area west of Lake Ontario and east of the Canadian Rockies, has frequently been described as a 'cultural void,' and only within the past few months a writer in Canadian Art, a magazine which should know better, wrote that "there exists, between Ontario and British Columbia, something close to an artistic wasteland."

A. F. KEYS, 1961²

There is evidence of a kind of amnesia that is a part of contemporary culture. Macramé, for example, was not invented in the communes of the sixties flower children. . . . To deny, or even worse, to forget the traditional roots of fibre and fabric impoverishes us all.

JOHN VOLLMER, 1998³

And, Just What Textile Treasures Have We Lost on the Journey?

The curatorial intention behind *Prairie Interlace: Weaving, Modernisms, and the Expanded Frame* has been to recover and record lost modernisms—in this case, the curators have brought together (for the first time) a heady collection of modern and postmodern works of fibre art made in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta between 1960 and 2000. The aim of this essay is to consider the implications that modernity and the critical success of the fibre art movement had on directing the extant Prairie textile narrative, in particular the history of the modern era (prior to 1960). The focus is not upon legacy, but rather ancestry, for the fibre art movement was a child of modern art and an active player in Modernism’s grand narrative. When one turns to the critical literature—critical recognition being a much-coveted condition of modern and postmodern art—it appears that the fibre art movement, like Athena from the head of Zeus, was born fully formed, circa 1960, owing nothing to the past. The first generation of fibre artists is described by late-century art historians as ‘modern’ for not only appropriating the formal language of modern art but for *transcending* textiles’ “humble craft origins” and for having “*liberated* the work from tradition and thus heightened their recognition by critics and the public.”⁴ As pioneers, they had no need to pay homage to the past, for the past is no guide in dealing with the new circumstances that make one a pioneer. The success of this strategy is reiterated in a 2022 article, “Textile artists: the

pioneers of a new material world,” by the arts editor of *Wallpaper*, Harriet Lloyd-Smith:

In the 1970s, coinciding with the women’s liberation movement, and the rise of feminist art, textiles underwent its own revolution. Fibre art was born: textiles was catapulted beyond the domestic space and unshackled from veiled art world snobbery. The medium took on a life beyond functional craft; it became textiles for textiles’ sake.⁵

In one sense, these art historians are correct: the 1960s and 1970s did, indeed, see fibre art accepted into the fine art fold; however, that does not mean that handcrafted textiles produced on the Prairies prior to 1960 were as un-modern or unworthy of note as one might assume from the critical literature. The “Modern” was a complex phenomenon which gained traction in Canada in the early part of the 20th century and was promoted as a new mode of existence, a new art aesthetic, and perhaps more significantly, a force of social and cultural transformation. (This was the case for several Prairie handweaving initiatives.) By tracing this narrative through the critical art literature and then shifting the lens to focus on the digital archives of contemporary accounts (newspapers, magazines, newsletters, reviews of art and craft exhibitions, and school calendars) one begins to understand how it was that Prairie handweaving activities (no matter how modern) were not only denied a presence in the narrowing world of *fine* art—but also how their stories were lost.⁶ This was furthered by what I call the *stand back—nothing to see—move along* school

of thought that continued to plague Prairie research, as it implied, “Why look for something when there is nothing to be found?”

In 1988, the textile historian John Vollmer lamented the lacuna, calling it a “kind of amnesia”:

Despite the relatively recent history of fibre art . . . and the explosion of the art form in the 1960s and 70s there is evidence of a kind of amnesia that is part of contemporary culture. Macramé, for example, was not invented in the communes of the sixties flower children. [T]o deny, or even worse, to forget the traditional roots of fibre and fabric impoverishes us all.⁷

However, so successful was the modernist campaign that even when Prairie artists of the 1980s and 1990s looked to history, it was to mine the history of past centuries rather than past decades.

It is helpful to remember that the Prairies experienced a late period of settlement, and the ability to craft goods out of local materials continued to have appeal as a matter of thrift, pride, and cultural identity well into the new century. As Dorothy Burnham, Canada’s doyenne of textile history and the curator of the National Gallery of Canada (NGC) exhibition *The Comfortable Arts: Traditional Spinning and Weaving in Canada* explained in 1981, “In eastern Canada, except for isolated pockets, local production of textiles was finished by about 1900. In western Canada, the pioneering period was just getting started at that time.”⁸ Thus the “traditional” Prairie textiles in the

NGC exhibition were made between 1900 and 1950 with many reflecting a *modern* aesthetic.⁹

Even a cursory study of Prairie newspapers published in the early part of the 20th century reminds us that geographic isolation (or regionalism) should not to be equated with cultural isolation (as suggested by A. F. Keys above); nor, for that matter, should tradition be seen as being in diametric opposition to modern.¹⁰ In 1914, just months before the Great War began, an article appeared in small town newspapers across southern Alberta. The article, “Modern Art Influence in Fabrics,” informed readers that there was a new vogue for colour “spreading through every branch of the applied arts,” and to underline this point it included an image of a modern textile by the Austrian architect and designer Joseph Hoffman. The author is adamant, not only about the future of modern textiles, but of their roots in tradition: “At first one may not like the new art, but that it has come to stay there is no doubt. It is the outgrowth of the seeds planted by William Morris.”¹¹

In 1927 the term “fabric art” appeared for the first time in the *Calgary Herald* to describe printed fabrics designed by modern artists. Readers were told, in no uncertain terms, how to recognize modern fabric’s stylish signature with “the new spirit, the new coloring, the new technique” borrowed from the “futurist school” of art.¹² That same year, an article in *Maclean’s Magazine*, “Woven Fabrics in Decoration: Canada provides a veritable wealth of material for following current mode,” reveals how traditional handweaving was being repositioned as modern. It was to be a vehicle

for creativity—admired for its colours, geometric structure, and texture—an attractive blend of art and utility ready to take on a role in the modern *urban* interior.

Now with so many imaginative weavers of all nationalities experimenting with the craft, and a younger generation of habitant women catering to the demand for color and smart effects, the possibilities for a really decorative covering have been increased. . . . There is a world of interest in investigating and utilizing the woven fabrics of today. They are rich in color, serviceable and original—warranting serious attention in new decorative schemes—and Canada, in particular, seems to provide a wealth of them.¹³

This journalist reiterates that these modern fabrics have their roots in the past—the product of a revival of “habitant weaving traditions.” The commercially successful revivals of folk craft which took place in Eastern Canada in the 1920s and 1930s were initiated by the Canadian Handicraft Guild and provincial governments to promote tourism.¹⁴ Under the guidance of Oscar Bériau (Director-General of Handicrafts for Québec), handweaving was positioned as an incarnation of French-Canadian heritage and an antidote to urban artifice and “the smoke and film of modernity, of hurried commerce.”¹⁵ Although it proved a successful marketing campaign, much of the rhetoric was immersed in “rural romanticism” with the “happy artisan” and the “cozy cottage” motif flooding the literature.

Bériau’s characterization labelled both the production and the makers as old-fashioned, making them an easy target for derision by modernists.¹⁶ Bériau, known best outside of Québec for his writing, would go on to be a significant force on the Prairies during the 1940s. His instructional text, *Home Weaving*, was in use across the Prairies and was described by *Craft Horizons*, the American Craft Council’s journal, as “One of the Finest! . . . calculated to set a nation spinning and weaving at home!”¹⁷

In his 1931 lecture “The Value of Handicrafts,” the new president of the Canadian Handicraft Guild, Wilfrid Bovey, advised that those in the West should consider stepping away from “the type of handicraft work which appeals mainly by reason of its *art value* or its curiosity value.” This was in part a response to the economic devastation wrought by the 1929 drought that heralded the Dirty Thirties on the Prairies.¹⁸ His advice: they should move towards a more practical commercial endeavour—as a viable home industry.

There is no reason in the world why the Canadian countryside should not produce all the handmade tweeds and linens that Canadians wear. . . . The settlers of Hebridean and Ukrainian origin in Alberta and the French-Canadians of Québec have traditional skill in such work and a hereditary bent for it.¹⁹

In 1934 Bovey maintained that provincial governments had a pressing duty to “country folk” and advocated for a *modern* revival of handweaving as “one of the greatest hopes for the Canadian farmer in the future, both

economically and as a “means of regaining a contented and permanent rural life.” He went on to urge the public, especially the “urban public,” to purchase “tweeds made in rural districts.”²⁰ He would explain, “Rural crafts are differentiated from these urban crafts not only because they are made in the country, but because, somehow or other they seem to breathe of the country, to have a country air.”²¹

So successful was this characterization that when the political and social activist Nellie McClung (1873–1951) published *Clearing in the West: My Own Story* (1935), her identity as a *modern* woman was one who “wouldn’t piece quilts or crochet, or knit.”²² Her autobiography reveals that McClung clearly envisaged the handmade as a resident of the rural past. She has a visiting teacher remark, “They are a symbol of an era in our history that is passing. Hand work is being superseded by machinery, and the fine creative household arts will be forgotten.”²³ McClung unexpectedly provides insights into evolving attitudes regarding handweaving on the Prairies: first as a signifier of domestic skill and resourcefulness; then a source of creative pleasure; and finally, a site of some embarrassment. Mrs. Mooney (Nellie’s mother) confides to their visitor that the younger generation “are a little bit ashamed of home-made stuff.”²⁴ McClung’s deliberate use of the descriptive “home-made” (with its overtones of the amateur and usefulness) rather than “handmade” (professional and bespoke) underscores the nascent *modernist* disdain for nostalgia, tradition, and rural and domestic values.



Handmade textiles from the nine provincial crafts guilds at *The Canadian Handicrafts Guild's Annual Prize and Competition Exhibition at the Montreal Art Association, 1933*. C11 D3 209 1933, La Guilde's Archives, Montréal, Canada.

Handweaving as a Contested and Negotiated Terrain

During the 1940s, handweaving was walking a cautious path, for an ambivalent, even antagonistic, relationship between modern art and *craft* was being constructed, with art critics and theorists contemptuous of craft's homey relationship with tradition. In “How Envy Killed the Crafts,” Garth Clark contends that this relationship grew

“increasingly acrimonious as artists moved further away from the craft-based values of the mid-century and closer to post-1950 conceptualization and the dematerialization of the art object.”²⁵ In 1939, the much-admired New York art critic Clement Greenberg theorized that as a modern artist either you belonged to the avant-garde, *challenging tradition*, or you produced *kitsch*. Within the decade, imputations of either the domestic or decoration were inherently damning to a would-be modern artist: “When the abstract artist grows tired, *he* becomes an interior decorator” and “decoration is the specter that haunts modernist painting.”²⁶ In the semantics of cultural value, “decorative” and “domestic” were no longer neutral terms.²⁷

Proponents of craft tried to extricate themselves from a cultural battle not of their making, as traditional values were to remain an integral element of modern craft. In 1942, Allen Eaton, the American craft revivalist, reviewed the *Exhibition of Modern British Crafts* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and felt it necessary to explain to the readers of the new journal *Craft Horizons* that there was a middle ground. When “modern” was used as a modifier of craft, it should not be feared. “It is modern in the best sense of that word, meaning that it is of today with a definite and pleasant relation to the past. [It is not] the indefinite, often confusing and sometimes freakish meaning which we attach to the word ‘modern.’”²⁸

In 1942, the American textile artist Ed Rossbach (1914–2002) wrote *Hand-Weaving as an Art Form*. Here, too, one sees tradition regarded as integral to a successful modern practice:

From their works we may conclude that the hand-weaver who would keep his craft a vital and significant art form must be thoroughly familiar with the medium, aware equally of its restrictions and its potentialities. He must have ideas to express—an aesthetic purpose, and he must use daring, patience, ingenuity, and sensitivity in continually exploring his medium for the best means of expressing those ideas.²⁹

Looking back from the 1980s, Rossbach suggested that, while hand weavers might have followed different paths (the dreaded art/craft debate), it was this tacit understanding that fibre encouraged innovation and “stimulated experiments in new materials” that led some weavers to the fibre art movement of the 1960s.³⁰ In several articles in *American Craft*, he describes the separate, yet intersecting, paths taken by several eminent weavers who were practicing in the 1940s. Two stand out: the Bauhaus-trained weaver Anni Albers (1899–1994), whose “intellectually geometric” weavings and aesthetic theories spoke of her allegiance to modern art, modern design, and modern processes (manufacturing), and Mary Meigs Atwater (1878–1956), “the Dean of American Weaving,” who was already well known having founded the Shuttle-Craft Guild in 1922 and published *The Shuttle-Craft Book of American Hand-Weaving. Being an account of the rise, development, eclipse and modern revival of a national popular art* in 1928.

Rossbach notes of Atwater that “By teaching her followers to value the traditional works and to appreciate them by copying and comprehending their structures, she

was responsible for a wider awareness of traditional weaving.” He concludes, “To Atwater, the weaver experienced both the artist’s job in creating and the craftsman’s satisfaction.”³¹

It is these values that inspired the Department of Extension at the University of Alberta to invite Atwater to teach weaving workshops at the School of Community Life in Olds, Alberta, in the summers of 1939 and 1940.³² The success of this venture saw Atwater become the first instructor of “Weaving and Design” in the newly created Applied Arts program (1941) of the Banff School of Fine Arts (p. 66). A grant from the Carnegie Corporation “to establish and maintain standards of craftsmanship in the province” made Atwater a natural fit. Carnegie scholarships in handweaving were administered by the Canadian Handicraft Guild.³³ The prospectus assured potential students:

The Banff School of Fine Arts considers itself fortunate in having as its first instructor in weaving Mrs. Mary Meigs Atwater, . . . She regularly conducts schools in various centres in the United States in addition to her school at Basin, Montana. Mrs. Atwater is recognized as an artist, designer and craftswoman who has done more to restore the art of weaving to its proper place in the country than any other single individual.³⁴

Atwater set the guiding principles for the Banff workshops and was aided by Ethel Henderson of Winnipeg, already a graduate of Atwater’s correspondence course. Both

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—AT—
School of Agriculture, Olds
JULY 3rd to 16th

COURSES OPEN TO ALL IN . . .
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS and CANADIAN PROBLEMS — RURAL SOCIOLOGY and COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION — PRINCIPLES of CO-OPERATION
DRAMATICS — WEAVING — HOME-MAKING.

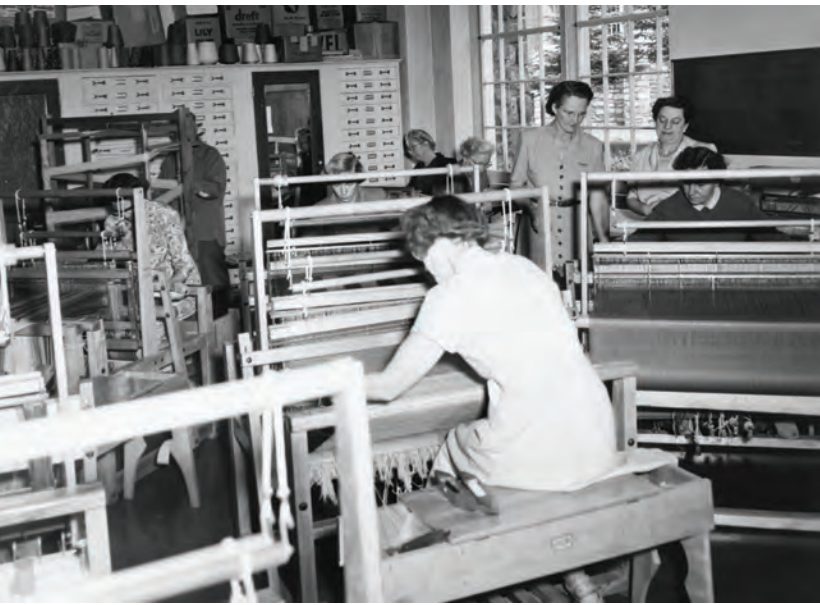
GUEST LECTURERS: Prof. Norman MacKenzie, University of Toronto; Prof. W. M. Drummond, Ontario Agricultural College; Mary M. Atwater, Basin, Montana.

Apply: Director, School of Community Life, Olds, Alberta.

Published in the *Calgary Herald*, a division of Postmedia Network Inc., June 29, 1940, 15. Courtesy of Olds College of Agriculture & Technology.

novice and advanced courses were offered at the Banff School with students meeting a series of objectives meant to raise standards, suggesting that not only a popular but also a critical interest in handweaving was being encouraged.³⁵ Donald Cameron, head of the university extension program, would gleefully remark, “Among the students was the millionaire head of a famous sewing machine company from California who was taking weaving.”³⁶ Students attending the Banff School that summer would have been well aware of the ongoing debate regarding the direction modern handweaving was taking as the July/August issue of *The Weaver* had just published Atwater’s indignant response to Anni Albers’ “Handweaving Today: Textile Work at Black Mountain College.” In the January/February edition, Albers had written:

Unfortunately, today handweaving has degenerated in face of technically superior methods of production. Instead of freely developing new



Weaving class at Banff School of Fine Arts, 1950. Courtesy of Glenbow Library and Archives Collection, Libraries and Cultural Resources Digital Collections, University of Calgary (CU1134332).

forms, recipes are often used, traditional formulas, which once proved successful. Freshness of invention, of intelligent and imaginative forming has been lost.³⁷ [The word “recipe” was a term regularly used by Atwater.]

Albers goes on to explain that there is a role handweaving might play: “[If it is] conceived as a preparatory step to machine production the work will be more than a revival of lost skill and will take responsible part in a new development.” Further, she contends “if handweaving is to regain actual influence on contemporary life, approved repetition has to be replaced with the adventure of new exploring. . . . [To] become art it needs nothing but its own high development and adjustment in all its properties.”³⁸

Elsewhere, Atwater had taken Albers to task for her use of modern formalist language; what others interpreted as an intellectual approach to handweaving, Atwater described as “quaint notions.”³⁹ In “It’s Pretty but is it Art?” Atwater begins, “I disagreed . . . so heartily. It is stimulating to disagree,” and continues, “Mrs. Albers suggests that handweaving ‘may be Art’ through what she calls ‘free-forming,’ without regard to ‘fulfillment of demand,’—by which, I take, it means fitness for practical use. This sounds like the old and long since discredited principle of ‘Art for Art’s Sake,’ and certainly holds little inspiration for the craftsman.” She adds, “a ‘free-formed’ textile, so casually constructed that it will not hold together, is really not a fabric at all.” At the same time, Atwater proposes that “‘New exploring’ is exciting, and is highly desirable *if* the explorer happens to be equipped with the technical knowledge and ability to take him somewhere.”⁴⁰

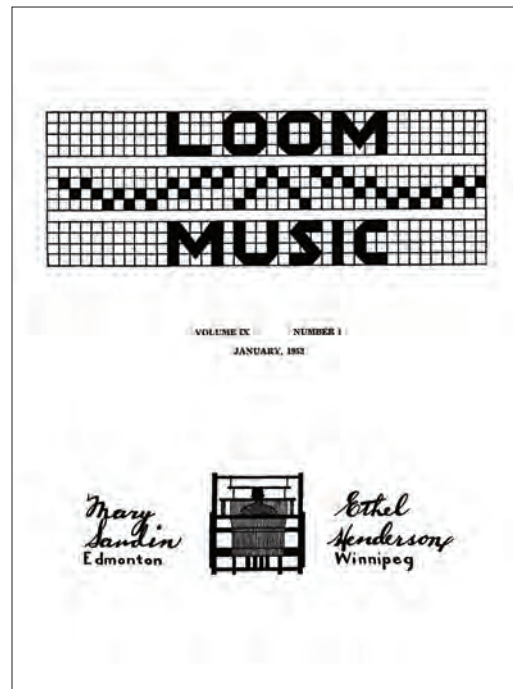
These articles must have encouraged serious discussions within the Banff cohort—perhaps sides were being taken—given that some were students or instructors in the Art Department of the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT or “The Tech”). The Tech had introduced weaving classes in the early 1930s as part of its popular three-year Applied Arts and Crafts Diploma, and by 1940 a designated weaving teacher was on the books.⁴¹ Indeed, many of the fibre artists in *Prairie Interlace* found their *footing* at the Tech including F. Douglas Motter (cat. 36), who was both a student and an instructor, teaching weaving from 1963 through 1976. Others, such as Hazel Schwass (discussed below), Inese Birstins (cat. 6), and Katharine

Dickerson (cat. 11), attended the Banff School.

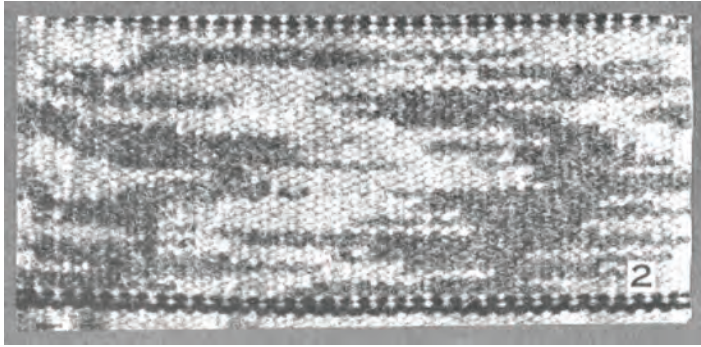
Atwater fully expected to teach at Banff the following year (July 28 to August 21, 1942); nonetheless, in early July she announced a sudden change in plan. “Due to Canadian government restrictions . . . visitors to Canada will not be permitted to purchase more than a total of twenty gallons of gasolene [sic] . . . It seemed advisable to give up the trip this year.”⁴² In his history of the school, Cameron would write that “Mrs. Henderson and Mrs. Mary Sandin of the U of A, who joined the staff in 1942, today are looked upon as two of the leading instructors in this field on the continent.”⁴³ That some of the handweaving being produced at Banff also had currency within modern art practices of the 1940s and 1950s is revealed not only in the reviews of art and craft exhibitions in local newspapers, but also on the pages of *Loom Music* (1945–1965), a multi-page newsletter aimed at Canadian weavers and guild members, and edited and produced by Sandin and Henderson. With its patterns, instructions, and copious amounts of advice, *Loom Music* echoes Atwater’s *Shuttle-Craft Bulletin* (1924–1954) and, like its American counterpart, provides a sense of the direction that handweaving on the Prairies was taking. For instance, the editors employed an excerpt from the British modern weaver Ethel Mairet’s text, *Hand Weaving Today—Traditions and Changes*, to challenge readers. Mairet identified the modern nature of “small individual workshops” for “they are constantly experimenting with all sides of handweaving . . . they are the valuable and necessary laboratories . . . they always use a critical attitude . . . they are



Left to Right: Winnifred Savauge, Ethel M. Henderson and Mary Sandin at the Banff School of Fine Arts. “Program Calendar,” *Applied Art* (c. 1947), 28. Courtesy of Paul D. Fleck Library and Archives, Banff, Alberta, Acc# 2003-10.



Loom Music IX, no. 1 (January 1952), cover.



Detail of *Automatic*, a free design technique. *Loom Music* IX, no. 2 (February 1952), 16.

always experimenting.³⁴⁴ Of their readers, the editors of *Loom Music* asked, “Can we, as a company of weavers, pledge ourselves to do one extra yard on each warp we set up, to be used as an experimental piece? Let us learn to be weavers—not blind followers of a set of instructions.”³⁴⁵

They were not blind followers. In 1945, Sandin and Henderson attended a Banff lecture given by the artist J. W. G. [Jock] Macdonald where they were introduced to automatic drawing.⁴⁶ Inspired, they went back to their looms and began to practice automatic weaving. “Our imperfect understanding of it was that one emptied the mind of conscious thought and gave the inner mind full sway. As this is exactly what we were to do in this weaving . . . [I]t made each row a real adventure, as we tried to let inspiration be our guide.”³⁴⁷

Handweaving was being introduced on the Prairies through other initiatives, and in a throwaway line, in 1939, Atwater distinguished between the handweaving revivals

of Québec and the promotion of *modern* handweaving on the Prairies: “A great deal of simple weaving has been done in Québec province for a number of years, chiefly as a source of income for the people on farms. The interest in western Canada is more recent and is more along the lines of art and less for commercial returns.”⁴⁸ The following year, after her experience teaching at Banff, she would write:

In Alberta and in British Columbia—no doubt in other Canadian provinces—the State [sic] Universities are doing a great deal to promote handicraft. [. . .] Young women with skill in handicraft are sent out into the most distant and inaccessible parts of the country to teach the young people such crafts as weaving . . . I do not know of any similar work being done by universities in the United States. I wonder why not!⁴⁹

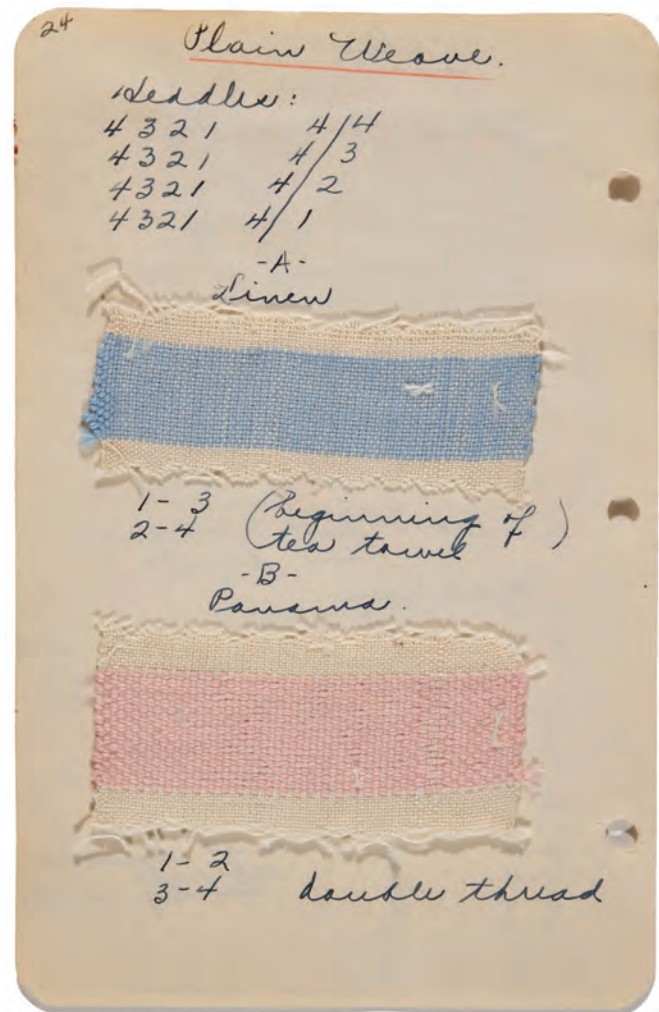
Not unexpectedly, Anni Albers was less than enthusiastic about such initiatives, identifying them as retrograde. “There is one other aspect of the work, one not intrinsically connected with the idea of future development; it is that of handweaving as a leisure-time occupation and as a source of income in rural communities, . . . [which is] often no more than a romantic attempt to recall a *temps perdu*, a result rather of an attitude than of procedure.” She warned, “it is necessary to keep in mind that handweaving here takes on the character of a means to an end and is not in itself the center of interest.”⁵⁰

Prairie Handweaving Initiatives of the 1940s

Only very recently some of the most important studies in education have revealed this; that the culture of the brain, the culture of life, the culture of the soul, begins with the culture of the finger tips. The neglect of the finger tips has led to the coarsening of the sense of touch and to the blunting of fine feelings.⁵¹

Sidestepping the critical debates and turning to first-hand documentation of the Prairie weaving culture (much available through digital archiving), one discovers that many hundreds of Prairie women (and it was mainly women) were introduced to handweaving through two rural educational initiatives that ran in the 1940s. One learns that many of these women took their new “traditional” skills and developed them further. These initiatives were described in contemporary accounts as modern—not only because they were introducing new materials and techniques—but because they were founded on the nuanced belief that they were a force of social and cultural transformation. Arguably, handweaving can be seen as a creative vehicle for modernist ideologies.

Both initiatives were inspired by the work done in Québec and followed a similar format—six weeks of structured classes saw each student complete a sample book. Janet Hoskins describes some extant sample books noting the unrelenting methodology not only over the duration of the class but over the years.⁵² These books served two



A page from Grace Ethel (Stoner) Sundstrom's sample book. She learned to weave while living in Kennedy, Saskatchewan in the 1930s by enrolling in the Searle program. Photo by Dave Brown, LCR Photo Services and sample book courtesy of Gail Niinimaa.

important purposes—as the means of documenting progress and techniques, and as an *aide-mémoire* for future projects or teaching. The first program to bring handweaving classes to rural Prairie communities was established in Manitoba in 1941, and with its large Franco-Manitoban population it was natural that the school board would look to Québec and Oscar Bériau for guidance.



Mrs. Dorothy Rankine, Consultant, "Searle Farm Home Weaving Service" is shown at home, weaving a coat-length from blue poodle wool. The draw-drapes, 22 yards, were woven by Mrs. Rankine from turquoise cotton and gardenia-white nubby boucle. The next-to-glass curtains were woven by Mrs. Norman Lewis, from Ice-Gold white nubby boucle and metallic. The famous G.E.T. in Québec hooked the large picture. The wool warp on the loom is 15 yards long—enough for a top coat and matching suit. *Leclerc Present the Hand Weaving Looms*, no. 128 (May 1956): cover. Image courtesy of the Manitoba Crafts Museum and Library, 130.00-08.

The classes were administered by *La société Canadienne d'enseignement postsecondaire du Manitoba* (the French Canadian section of the Manitoba Adult Education Association) and the Roman Catholic Church. Bériau sent for two French-speaking weaving instructors from the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary (SNJM) in Québec, and the first class was held at St. Joseph's Academy, St. Boniface, in July 1941.⁵³

The press followed the progress of the scheme with great interest, mostly privileging the French-Canadian, Roman Catholic family values being espoused. In 1942, when the Ste. Agathe "farm home weaving circle" completed their course of study, an exhibition of the work was described in some detail in the *Winnipeg Tribune*.⁵⁴ Although the work was admired, neither the teacher nor the students were identified, and the spokesperson interviewed was the parish priest. And, reminiscent of a Victorian father, Father Clovis Paillé is effusive:

We hope it will lead to sheep raising and the growing of flax. It's not just the fact that they have learned to make pretty and useful things for their homes that made the course so successful . . . It has taught them thrift, patience and perseverance. It has taught us older people that not all the young ones want to spend their time in idle pleasures.⁵⁵

Along a similar vein, *Le tissage domestique en Saskatchewan*, 1943, finds L'abbé Maurice Baudoux describing handweaving as a means to address the vicissitudes of rural isolation and the war and goes on to speak of the role domestic textiles are playing in the

war effort. To his mind, handweaving had done much to elevate the taste for “home-made” items, and he argues that it will allow creativity to flourish in times of peace.⁵⁶

The second scheme was secular and benevolent and is credited with teaching “over 1,000 rural women and girls to weave, free of charge to students, which enables them to make beautiful and useful materials for the home at a fraction of the cost at which the goods could be purchased.”⁵⁷ Augustus L. Searle, of the Searle Grain Company, had watched in dismay as not only young men, but many young women had left the farm to join the war effort. His goal was to stabilize the farm family and prevent further migration to the cities. He, too, would turn to Bériau, who is described in the Searle publication, *Hand Loom Weaving*, as “undoubtedly the greatest authority on the American continent, and one of the greatest authorities of the world, on handicrafts including weaving.”⁵⁸ In 1942 Searle established a weaving program that aimed, as the *Winnipeg Tribune* noted, “not to establish a new farm industry but merely to show farm women how to weave so they can improve their own individual surroundings.”⁵⁹

Oscar Bériau’s daughter, Renée, herself a master weaver, travelled to Manitoba to recruit and train potential instructors for Searle. Four women were selected. All were accomplished weavers, fluent in English but each spoke at least one other language—two French, one Swedish, and one Ukrainian and Russian, which speaks to the ongoing Prairie handweaving traditions.⁶⁰ Upon completing the intensive three-month course the newly minted instructors were sent to rural communities in Alberta and



A Searle Weaving class in operation. *Hand Loom Weaving.... The story of the Searle Grain Company's Effort to Sponsor Handloom Weaving Among the Farm Women of the Prairie Provinces* (Winnipeg, 1944), n.p.

Saskatchewan where they met, according to Frank Kennedy the *Calgary Herald's* agricultural editor, with “conspicuous success,” partly because the company “bears all the expense, and materials used by the pupils for the instruction period are also provided free by the company.”⁶¹

Classes were taught in towns with a Searle Grain Elevator, meaning the looms and other weaving equipment could be delivered by rail and then easily moved to another Searle location. Students signed a waiver agreeing “to carry out faithfully the detailed instructions of the teacher, and to weave only during the period of instruction



Handicrafts made by pupils of Searle Weaving classes. *Hand Loom Weaving.....The story of the Searle Grain Company's Effort to Sponsor Hand-loom Weaving Among the Farm Women of the Prairie Provinces* (Winnipeg, 1944), n.p.

such materials and such designs as the teacher shall approve, and which form part of the teaching course.”⁶² “The only obligation required of the pupils is that after they have graduated and formed a weaving circle, they in turn will teach free of charge farm women who desire to learn weaving.”⁶³ Searle graduates continued to weave, to teach, to form guilds, to experiment, and to exhibit their work.⁶⁴ In “The World of Wheat,” Searle Grain’s research director would often provide updates on the weaving program. He was able to report in 1943 that 200 students had sent samples of their weaving to be adjudicated in Québec for an exhibition—where they were much admired and, according to Strange, “examined not without some jealousy.”⁶⁵ The methodology was one that

would have been familiar to Atwater: “you learned weaving by weaving—and you started weaving *something*.”⁶⁶ But where one took these skills after completing the class was another matter.

Hazel Schwass: A Graduate of the Searle Weaving Program

Saskatchewan-born artist Hazel [Pollock] Schwass, was eighteen when she embarked on the six-week Searle course, forty-nine when she created *Untitled*, 1974 (cat. 51), and sixty when she outlined the artistic path she had forged for the Alberta Culture Visual Arts’ Personal Artist File in 1984. In it she credits her success as a fibre artist to the Searle’s concentrated instruction on a four-harness loom, for it made her “self-sufficient in loom operation, 40 weaving techniques and practical application.”

Her enthusiasm for weaving did not diminish, and over the years she continued to expand her textile skill sets—taking courses not only in various forms of weaving, but also in spinning and dyeing.

I have woven in the traditional mode for twenty years. This grounding in technique and finish is the background I use in all my work. I feel weaving, be it practical or art piece, must be structurally sound and woven with those quality standards in mind.⁶⁷

Admittedly proud of her functional work, one cannot help but wonder if a 1972 article, published in the *Calgary Herald*, served as a tipping point in the direction her practice would take. With a metaphorical pat

on her head, the journalist Ken Liddell mansplained,

From a cottage industry that is a hobby and therapeutic occupation carried out in the basement of her home—in what is labeled the ‘fun room’—Mrs. Schwass makes products that are warm and comfy: Saddle blankets for horses and little car seat covers for humans.⁶⁸

Within two years Schwass had found her passion, “free-form woven art,” and was creating and exhibiting conceptual *fibre art* pieces—such as *Untitled*. She was also creating large-scale public commissions. In 1979 Schwass won a scholarship to attend the Banff School of Fine Arts which saw her studying with Mary Snyder and focusing on multi-harness loom and three-dimensional weaving. And, as Augustus Searle had hoped, when he introduced the program, Schwass continued to inspire new generations of weavers through her teaching, much of it done in Lethbridge, Alberta.⁶⁹ Like many of the artists featured in *Prairie Interlace*, Schwass combined traditional and non-traditional skill sets,

I feel my weaving has progressed from two-dimensional ‘wall hangings’ to concepts and designs for three-dimensional works suitable for office and public areas. I am constantly exploring and experimenting with materials other than fibre to incorporate in my work.⁷⁰

Conclusion: Stand Back— Nothing to See—Move Along

Whereas the production of material culture through such schemes has been dismissed as acts of benevolence or romantic revivals, there should be no doubt that the history and legacy of modern handweaving on the Prairies is a rich one and requires much more scrutiny. Arguably, Prairie schemes promoting handweaving *were* modern, theorized in the day by socially utopian ideologies. But these weavers were also active within the world of art and craft, and it should be obvious that “community based and interactive projects that serve artisans, consumers and patrons” such as the Banff School of Fine Art, the Art Department of the Tech, and the Searle Grain Home Weaving Program also signal “artisan independence, agency and nascent resistance.”⁷¹

The aim of this chapter has been to consider the role modernity played in the critical success of the fibre art movement and determine how this success directed the extant generational textile narrative. It did so by bringing a series of “lost” mid-century Prairie textile initiatives to the forefront. There is no doubt that the modernist art rhetoric of the mid-century was responsible for the elevation and critical acceptance of fibre art in the 1960s and 1970s, even as it perpetuated ongoing prejudices (gender, media, cultural, regional) that ensured that traditional textile practices, regardless of how modern, would continue to be relegated to a marginal position, if at all, in the literature.⁷²

When John Vollmer called the gap in textile history a “kind of amnesia,” we must

remind ourselves that amnesia is not innocent; it is constructed just as all knowledge bases are constructed. While benefiting from the early modern tradition in the acquisition of a knowledge base, the first generations of fibre artists emphasized the conceptual excitement of the transition to art. Eschewing time-honoured sobriquets and traditional relationships with handweaving, these *artists* experimented with new media and techniques and were welcomed as *pioneers* of the new *art form*—the fibre arts.⁷³ It may even be argued that adherence to tradition would have only aggravated the ongoing hierarchical prejudices. By the late 1980s, fibre artists were being positioned as postmodern renegades who had creatively appropriated fibre as a subversive medium. Nonetheless, so successful was the modernist campaign that even when these artists looked to history, it

was to the textile history of past centuries rather than past decades.

As this research suggests, this is only an initial foray into seemingly uncharted waters with much more to discover about innovative Prairie textile practices. Simply by shifting the focus from art to craft, an enriched textile narrative emerges from the archives of Prairie social history. What is on offer does not diminish but enhances the significance of the work done on the Prairies and represented in this exhibition. Each work offers up another point of entry into an alternative history that is waiting to be told, for there is now substantial evidence to argue that the seeds for a robust, regionally based, *modern* textile and textile art movement were being planted on the Prairies well before the fibre art movement took form.



NOTES

- 1 Nellie McClung, "Visit from the Teacher," *Clearing in the West: My Own Story* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1935), 178.
- 2 A. [Archibald] F. Keys, "Introduction," *Alberta Artists, 1961* (Calgary: Calgary Allied Arts Council, 1961), n.p.
- 3 John Vollmer, in *Cinquième Biennale de Tapisserie Contemporaine de Montréal* (Montréal: Quebec Society of Contemporary Tapestry, 1988), 43. Vollmer was Senior Curator of Fine and Decorative Arts at the Glenbow-Alberta Institute, Calgary, 1984–86.
- 4 Karen Patterson, ed., *Lenore Tawney: Mirror of the Universe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019); Mildred Constantine and Jack Lenor Larson, *Beyond Craft: The Art Fabric* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1972), 7.
- 5 Harriet Lloyd-Smith, "Textile artists: the pioneers of a new material world," *Wallpaper*, March 24, 2022, <https://www.wallpaper.com/art/contemporary-textile-artists>.
- 6 Researchers from a variety of disciplines have taken up the challenge, although their findings have yet to be woven together to create a meaningful Prairie narrative.
- 7 Vollmer, *Cinquième Biennale*, 43.
- 8 Dorothy Burnham, "Multi-Cultural Traditions in Western Canada," *The Comfortable Arts: Traditional Spinning and Weaving in Canada* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1981), 202.
- 9 The National Gallery of Canada exhibition identified Indigenous, settler, and immigrant textile traditions.
- 10 Virginia Nixon, "The Concept of Regionalism in Canadian Art History," *Journal of Canadian Art History* 10, no. 1 (1987): 30–41.
- 11 "Modern Art Influence in Fabrics," *Carlstadt News*, March 11, 1914, 11.
- 12 "Women to Wear Signed Works by Eminent Artists," *Calgary Daily Herald*, March 25, 1927, 11.
- 13 Anne Elizabeth Wilson, "Woven Fabrics in Decoration: Canada provides a veritable wealth of material for following current mode," *Maclean's*, August 15, 1927, 65–66.
- 14 Oscar Bériau, "Craft Revival in Quebec," *Craft Horizons* 2, no. 1 (November 1942): 25–26.
- 15 Louis Arthur Cunningham, "Among the Cottage Crafters," *Canadian Home Journal* (March 1933): 8, 34, 40.
- 16 T. J. Jackson Lear, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1860–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).
- 17 Oscar Bériau, *Home Weaving* (Quebec: Department of Agriculture, 1939); "Book Review," *Craft Horizons* 2, no. 1 (1942): 27; "The Craft Revival in Quebec," *Craft Horizons* 2, no. 1 (1942): 25–27.
- 18 Given the Prairie provinces depended almost exclusively on raw materials and agricultural production, the drought heralded a decade historically recognized as the Great Depression.
- 19 Wilfrid Bovey, "The Value of Handicrafts," *Calgary Daily Herald*, February 6, 1931, 4. See also: "One Result of the Immense Tourist Traffic in Canada is a Revival of Home Industries," *Oyen News*, February 8, 1928, 5; "To Develop Home Art Industries: Canadian Handicraft Guild to Hold Exhibition in Regina," *Irma Times*, March 1, 1929, 2.
- 20 Wilfrid Bovey, "Future of Handicrafts: Means of Regaining Contented and Permanent Rural Life," *Crossfield Chronicle*, January 18, 1934, 6; *Redcliff Review*, February 1, 1934, 3.
- 21 Wilfrid Bovey, "'Colonel Bovey's Address' Art Reference Round Table," [Montreal Conference], *Bulletin of the American Library Association* 28, no. 9 (September 1934): 551–55.
- 22 McClung, "Visit," 242.
- 23 McClung, "Visit," 177.
- 24 McClung, "Visit," 178.
- 25 Garth Clark, "How Envy Killed the Crafts," in Glenn Adamson, *The Craft Reader* (London: Berg, 2010), 446.
- 26 Clement Greenberg, "Review of Exhibitions of Joan Miró, Fernand Leger, and Wassily Kandinsky," [1941] in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Vol 1: Perceptions and Judgments, 1933–1944*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 64; "Milton Avery," [1957] in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*, 43.
- 27 John Bentley Mays, "Comment," *American Craft* 45, no. 6 (December 1985/January 1986), in Adamson, *Craft Reader*, 430–40. The Canadian art critic, Mays, explained why art critics "will never be paying as much attention to crafts as craftspeople (and even some artists) think they should." "This is so not because craft or craft-as-art (as I have experienced it) are inferior to art, but because they are not art" (432).
- 28 Allen Eaton, "Exhibition of Modern British Crafts," *Craft Horizons* 2, no. 1 (March 1942): 8–10. From the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, it travelled to Ottawa, Montreal, and Quebec City in 1943.
- 29 Ed Rossbach, "Hand-Weaving as an art form," *Craft Horizons* 8, no. 23 (November 1948): 20–21.

- 30 Ed Rossbach, "Fiber in the Forties," *Craft Horizons* 42, no. 5 (November 1982): 15–19.
- 31 Ed Rossbach, "Mary Atwater and the Revival of American Traditional Weaving," *American Craft* 43, no. 5 (April–May 1983): 22.
- 32 "Handicraft Expert Flies to Olds for School. Noted Weaver. Olds School Agriculture," *Calgary Daily Herald*, July 4, 1939, 8.
- 33 Ralph Clark, *A History of the Department of Extension at the University of Alberta, 1912–1956* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985). In 1943 Alice B. Van Delinder was awarded a scholarship. She taught at Banff for ten years and at the Tech for fifteen. "Weaving Instructor Retires," *Calgary Herald*, May 16, 1962.
- 34 *Banff School of Fine Arts* [calendar], 1942, 17.
- 35 Early class lists reveal a surprising number of students from the United States.
- 36 Donald Cameron, *Campus in the Clouds* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1956), 36.
- 37 Anni Albers, "Handweaving Today: Textile Work at Black Mountain College," *Weaver* 6, no. 1 (January/February 1941): 1.
- 38 Albers, "Handweaving Today," 1, 5.
- 39 "Quaint Notions," cited in Rossbach, "Mary Atwater," 22; As Rossbach points out, "museum directors felt safe with the weavings of Anni Albers. They trusted her intellectual approach to fiber, her control, her absence of sensuous colour, her emphasis on the grid. With her work they avoided the artsy-crafty stigma." Ed Rossbach, "In the Bauhaus Mode: Anni Albers," *American Craft* 43 (December 1983–January 1984): 7–11; Ed Rossbach, "Fiber in the Forties," 15–19.
- 40 Mary Meigs Atwater, "It's Pretty—But is it Art?" *The Weaver* 6, no. 3 (July–August 1941): 12, 13.
- 41 Given that students were being prepared to enter the job market, handweaving classes were meant to support teachers, creative makers, and following the First World War, occupational therapy. Mrs. B. K. Benson (b. 1870 Iceland) taught spinning and weaving at the Tech in 1939 and in 1943 boasted "I have never copied from a pattern in my life." "Makes Clothing From Rabbit Wool," *Calgary Herald*, May 12, 1943, 8. In 1940, a recent hire at the Tech, J. B. McLellan, a graduate of the Glasgow School of Art (1937) with a background in craft (he would be the first to teach "Applied Art" at the Banff School of Fine Arts in 1941), was dismayed to discover that the looms had not made the trip to the new location. "Anxious to get his students started, Mr. McLellan made a small loom at home, and also some weaving boards, on which the first principles of threading a loom and color blending in design, could be learned." One can see his interest went beyond the utilitarian: "although weaving is tedious until the loom is threaded, it amply repays the worker, because such satisfactory color effects can be gained with threads, which give a richer and much clearer product than can possibly be obtained by mixtures of pigment on palette." Margaret L. Steven, "Healing by Handicraft: Classes Reflect Post-War Problems." *Calgary Herald*, January 18, 1941, 23.
- 42 Mary Meigs Atwater, *Shuttle-Craft Bulletin* (July 1942): 4.
- 43 Cameron, *Campus in the Clouds*, 36; Sandin was also a member of the Shuttle-Craft Guild, and mentioned in the April 1940 *Bulletin*.
- 44 Ethel Mairet, *Hand Weaving Today—Traditions and Changes* (London: Faber & Faber, 1939), cited in *Loom Music* 4, no. 9 (September 1947): 77. (Mairet's weaving was included in the Modern British Craft Exhibition).
- 45 *Loom Music* 4, no. 9 (September 1947): 77.
- 46 The Banff School of the Fine Arts, 1945 Calendar, 17. Biographical note: "James W. G. Macdonald D.A. (Edin) obtained a Diploma of Design at the Edinburgh College of Art in 1922; combined with practical design and spent three and one-half years as staff designer to a large textile factory in England, designing cretonnes, prints, damasks, carpets and embroideries."
- 47 *Loom Music* 9, no. 2 (February 1952): 15.
- 48 Mary Meigs Atwater, *Shuttle-Craft Bulletin* (September 1939): 4. "In the matter of weaving materials, however, Canada is far more fortunate than we. Cottons to be sure are more expensive than with us—but the beautiful linens, wools and worsteds, at prices far below the rates we pay were enough to make a weaver's mouth water."
- 49 *Shuttle-Craft Bulletin* (September 1940): 4.
- 50 Albers, "Handweaving Today," 7.
- 51 Dr. Jas. Robertson, C.M.G., founder of the Canadian Seed Growers Assoc., cited in "Introduction," *Hand Loom Weaving . . . The story of the Searle Grain Company's Effort to Sponsor Hand-Loom Weaving Among the Farm Women of the Prairie Provinces* (Winnipeg: Searle Grain Co., 1944).
- 52 Janet A. Hoskins, "Weaving Education in Manitoba in the 1940s" (master's thesis, University of Manitoba, 1982). In 2017 the Saskatchewan Craft Council asked contemporary weavers to respond to Bériau's text and extant samples, resulting in the exhibition, *Prairie Woven: From Utilitarian Roots to Contemporary Art*, Saskatoon, SK.
- 53 Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary (SNJM) is a French-speaking teaching order founded in Quebec.
- 54 Works made were mainly domestic—scarves, baby shawls, curtains, tweed yardage, etc.—but also religious, such as altar mats. *Winnipeg Free Press*, March 9, 1943, 8.

- 55 Verena Garrioch, "Villagers of St. Agathe Present Display of Weaving," *Winnipeg Tribune*, November 17, 1942, 8.
- 56 L'abbé Maurice Baudoux (Secrétaire de la société Canadienne d'enseignement postsecondaire, section française de la Saskatchewan), "Le tissage domestique en Saskatchewan," *La Liberté et le patriote*, January 20, 1943, 3.
- 57 "Grain Trade Answers C. F. A. Convention Charge," *Calgary Herald*, February 25, 1947, 3.
- 58 Searle Grain Company Ltd., *Hand-Loom Weaving*, Winnipeg, July 1944.
- 59 Alice McEachern, "Grain Firm Sponsors Weaving Instruction," *Winnipeg Tribune*, April 18, 1942, 3.
- 60 McEachern, "Grain Firm," 3.
- 61 Fred Kennedy, "Weaving Classes Popular on Farms: Project inaugurated by Searle Grain Co. Ltd. Providing of Great Value to West Farm Women," *Calgary Herald*, October 3, 1944, 13.
- 62 "Farm Home Weaving Circles Rules and Regulations," Searle Grain (Research Department), Winnipeg, February 1, 1943, cited in Hoskins, "Weaving Education," 108.
- 63 Kennedy, "Weaving Classes," 13.
- 64 D. Geneva Lent, "Folk Arts Exhibit Here Next Week," *Calgary Herald*, October 6, 1945, 8; Two years into the program, the company confirmed that "so far 246 forty-five inch looms had been purchased and estimated that over 10,000 yards of 45 inch material had been woven by graduates." *Hand-Loom Weaving*.
- 65 H. G. L. Strange, "The World of Wheat Reviewed Weekly," *Chronicle*, December 9, 1943, 1.
- 66 Rossbach, "Mary Atwater," 28.
- 67 "Hazel Schwass, Fibre Artist," Personal Artists File, Alberta Visual Arts, September 1984; National Gallery of Canada Artist file (30525), Textiles, December 15, 1987.
- 68 Ken Liddell, *Calgary Herald*, February 9, 1972, 5.
- 69 "Hazel Gladys Evelyn Schwass," obituary, November 12, 2011, Myalternatives, <https://www.myalternatives.ca/acme/obituaries/2011-schwass-hazel-gladys-evelyn>.
- 70 "Hazel Schwass, Fibre Artist," National Gallery of Canada Artist file.
- 71 Janice Helland, "Benevolence, Revival and 'Fair Trade': An Historical Perspective," in Janice Helland, Beverly Lemire, and Alena Buis eds., *Craft, Community and the Material Culture of Place and Politics 19th-20th Century* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2014), 137.
- 72 Typically, Prairie production of the first half of the century was dismissed as traditional, aligned with gender, domesticity, and utility, and positioned as endangered keepsakes of interest only to antiquarians and social and cultural historians.
- 73 Catherine Roy (retired, Royal Alberta Museum) was invaluable in spurring me on and alerting me to the fact that these modern weavers had long been incorporating roadside grasses for wefts: See *Loom Music* 10, no. 6 (1953): 45.