

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

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Installation view of *Prairie Interlace: Weaving, Modernisms, and the Expanded Frame, 1960–2000*, Nickle Galleries, 2022.

Katharine Dickerson, *West Coast Tree Stump*, c. 1972 (cat. 11)

Living and Liveable Spaces: Prairie Textiles and Architecture

by Susan Surette

Over the centuries, notable architects, such as Vitruvius, Gottfried Semper, Alfred Loos, and Le Corbusier, have argued for the enduring and compelling alliance between textiles and architecture. Semper observed that textiles and their processes were the primary manifestations of architecture: they can *be* the enclosing walls and they can *cover* walls as interior dressings.¹ In the early 20th century, the modernist architect Alfred Loos mused how carpets laid on floors or hung on walls helped an architect fulfill their task “to provide a warm and liveable space,” further reflecting that the architect’s second task was to create “a structural frame to hold them in the correct place.”² Whether textiles serve *as* architecture or *for* architecture, they create warmth and security,³ and the works in this exhibition make this intimate relationship explicit. Katharine Dickerson’s *West Coast Tree Stump* (cat. 11) is large enough that two people can comfortably sit in its enclosed space, as Dickerson discovered during its display at the 1974 World Crafts Council exhibition in Toronto, *By Hand*.⁴ The Ta-hah-sheena latch-hooked rugs (cat. 7, 15, 16, 17, 24, 33, 34, 54, 60, 61) that sit on floors and hang from walls—works produced by the Sioux Handcraft Co-operative of Standing Buffalo First Nation—are ideal for assuring warmth in winter. As observed in the catalogue of their 1988 exhibition, “*Ta-Hah-Sheena* [is] the Sioux word for decorated animal hides worn as ceremonial capes at religious and social gatherings. When not in use, the capes doubled as tapestries beautifying the interior walls of the tipi and providing additional insulation from the cold Saskatchewan winter . . . [The word] *Ta-Hah-Sheena* connected the co-operative’s modern-day tapestries to a traditional form of Sioux tapestry.”⁵ With their geometric designs, these latch-hooked rugs enlivened modernist architectural spaces such as the University of Regina’s Dr. John Archer Library (p. 85).⁶ The fantasy of a flying carpet soaring through night skies over the Alberta landscape was injected into Esso’s University of Calgary research centre by Murray Gibson’s 1990 woven tapestry, *Prairie Carpet* (cat. 14). Throughout the 20th century, textiles as the heart of living

and liveable spaces became an important preoccupation for architects, designers, and fibre artists, including those of the Canadian Prairies.

Architectural textiles modify how we physically and emotionally interact with our spaces and ultimately with each other;⁷ they act upon and with us in particular times and places. As Canadian craft historian Sandra Alföldy has argued, architecture and the allied arts, which includes fibre art, are interconnected through material, scale and form, ornament, and identity.⁸ Helping us to be aware of and negotiate both physical and social spaces, carpets and wall hangings guide us through entrances and passageways, along walls, across floors, and up and down stairs. Textiles on walls, across windows, and beneath our feet decorate a building's spaces, but equally as important they serve as markers for our movement through these interiors as we consciously or unconsciously become aware of details such as textural variations, large and small design elements, colour plays, and matte and reflective fibres.⁹ Emphasizing both surfaces and voids, these interlacing structures culturally and socially connect us through common visual and material languages, offering comfort, security, and delight.

By the mid-20th century it had become clear that modern architecture's large-scale bleak monumental concrete forms had failed to offer a comfortable, people-centred experience, and modernist architects were keenly aware that a solution lay in the integration of the decorative arts, including textiles. At the time, Henry H. Reed, Jr., observed that the idea of the monumental in architecture was a "recent invention," borrowed from

the French *monumentale*, to underscore a building's "grandeur, majesty [and] magnificence." Moreover, he contended, "[i]t is only with ornament that we can obtain a sense of scale, it is only on ornament that the eye can rest, it is only by ornament that the eye can measure."¹⁰ Reinserting human scale into these monumental structures required ornament, but equally impressive ornament that would not be lost in the vast spaces and, yet, could still speak to the people within them. Questions arose, such as how was this goal to be achieved; how were such commissions to be realized; and how and when were the artists to be engaged? Prominent Edmonton architect Peter Hemingway championed the integration of art into buildings as fundamental for the successful creation of warm, dynamic architectural spaces, suggesting this required the involvement of the artist in the project from the outset. He observed, "the artwork and the space must be developed together."¹¹ Throughout the Prairie provinces weavings proved to be key in complementing architectural monumentality by celebrating it *and* by making a place for people within it. This essay examines how Prairie weavers tackled the myriad challenges of creating works for modern architectural spaces, while engaging with an international community of technical and aesthetic improvisors and innovators.

Numerous converging factors contributed to the popularity of large-scale fibre works in the mid-20th century. A key event was the 1962 inauguration of the Lausanne International Tapestry Biennial spearheaded by Jean Lurçat, who was credited with reviving European tapestry weaving

in the 20th century. His own vibrant designs, such as *Comme par Miracle*, 1945, were woven in tapestry workshops that had previously largely produced reproductions of romantic and classical paintings. The Biennials emphasized monumentality and design originality in contemporary tapestries,¹² which were written about as murals or walls and described by Le Corbusier as “muralnomads” because of their portability.¹³ Throughout its lifetime the Biennial showcased woven wall hangings with sumptuous textures and colours and on- and off-loom interlace structures that leapt off wall surfaces, crawled across floors, or hung from ceilings. Some were overtly architectural as people moved in and through them. These exhibitions, among similar shows worldwide, including the Polish International Triennial of Tapestry held at the Central Museum of Textiles in Łódź, for example, precipitated the new fibre art movement that touched Prairie fibre artists. Before emigrating to Canada, Eva Heller had studied weaving in Łódź at the Academy of Fine Art where she encountered regular Lausanne participants, such as the experimental “superstar” Magdalena Abakanowicz and the renowned Jolanta Owidzka.¹⁴ Heller evaluated the importance of the Łódź Central Museum of Textiles as a weaver’s “Louvre”, a place for study and inspiration.¹⁵ In 1973, another Prairie weaver, Margreet van Walsem, traveled to the sixth Lausanne Biennial where the weavings on display “inspired her to regard the medium as a sculptural form.”¹⁶ Even before van Walsem’s visit, the first few biennials had included tapestries by the Québec weaver Mariette Rousseau-Vermette, who subsequently taught textiles

at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity in the late 1970s, becoming the Studio Head in 1982.¹⁷

Rousseau-Vermette was familiar with what monumental tapestry entailed through her Lausanne participation and her work with architects, where she learned to negotiate “the more formalized and hierarchical process of realizing architectural commissions,”¹⁸ knowledge she shared with her students.¹⁹ Passionate that her “tapestries contribute to the architecture of today,” Rousseau-Vermette worked closely with architects such as Arthur Erickson, under whom she created the two-panel *Sous-bois au printemps*, c. 1968, for his brutalist 1968 MacMillan Bloedel Building in Vancouver.²⁰ Historian Anne Newlands describes how these abstract tapestries brought the exterior to the interior: “Installed on the concrete walls of a main floor corridor, they evoked the dappled light of the forest in springtime, and with their striking verticality, each approximately four metres high, echoed both the soaring concrete grid of the building’s exterior.”²¹ The tapestry’s subject of spring undergrowth, only clearly defined through the title, was highly appropriate as an ode to the old growth forests on which this major West Coast forestry corporation depended.²² Following regional and international examples, other experimental weavers brought the outside inside, such as Carol Little, who wove the vibrant red, three-dimensional hanging tapestry *Furrow* (cat. 29) while working with the only commercial weaving studio in Calgary, Douglas Motter and Associates, and Gayle Platz, who hung her highly textured *Large Tapestry Weave* of 1974 (cat. 43) on a branch. Katharine



Katherine Dickerson seated amidst *West Coast Forest*, installed in the Douglas Building, Victoria, British Columbia. Photo by Rob D'Estrube. *Artswest Magazine* 2, no. 5 (September 1977): 24. Image courtesy Katharine Dickerson.



Kaija Sanelma Harris, *Sun Ascending*, c. 1985. Installed in the Toronto Dominion Bank Tower Lobby, Toronto, Ontario. Photo by Robert Stainforth / Alamy Stock Photo.

Dickerson, professor at the Alberta College of Art and Design 1977–2007, undertook an early public art commission *West Coast Forest*, 1974–75, influenced by “the notion of ‘growth’ of ‘the lush flora’” surrounding her West Coast farm. This highly textured, invitingly tactile, and immersive monumental project framed the staircase in the Government of British Columbia’s Douglas Building in Victoria before it was removed by the succeeding government that deemed it unwieldy.²³ Conversely, projecting the inside outside was one of the goals of Kaija Sanelma Harris’ vibrantly coloured *Sun Ascending* (cat. 21), originally installed by a large window in the foyer of Mies van der Rohe’s 1984 Toronto TD Bank Tower. She was keenly aware that her tapestry would be highly visible from the plaza, especially when illuminated at night, but that “[d]epending on the weather, season, and time of day, these walls may be partly obscured from outside by reflections, shadows or glare on glass.”²⁴ Harris also carefully brought the exterior perspective of the bank tower inside by decreasing the panels’ vertical dimensions and modulating their colours to emphasize the soaring height of the building.²⁵ Like medieval tapestries, these new fibre arts were evaluated architectonically by how they were “consistent with the order of the spaces in which they were hung”—spaces which, like their medieval predecessors, were invitingly expansive.²⁶

Harris, among other Prairie textile artists, had been inspired by the New York Museum of Modern Art’s seminal 1969 exhibition *Wall Hangings*, which “presented to the American museum-going public the first international survey of primarily large-scale,

abstract woven and off-loom work in fiber.”²⁷ Extensively toured in North America, this exhibition encouraged makers to creatively engage with fibres on a large scale, and to experiment with techniques and a variety of materials. Two seminal American publications by curator Mildred Constantine and textile designer Jack Lenor Larsen, one a catalogue of the exhibition and the other published a decade later, featured full-page illustrations of monumental contemporary fibre works and insightful analyses, intensifying interest in and acceptance of these hangings as a new kind of art.²⁸ The American *Fiberarts Magazine*, first published in 1976, became an influential aesthetic, technical, and marketing resource for many weavers as it disseminated the emerging innovative approaches to fibres. Experimental techniques and materials highlighted in these exhibitions and publications are reflected in two texturally evocative Prairie loom-based works from 1974, *Untitled Wall Hanging* by Hazel Schwass (cat. 51) and *Large Tapestry Weave* by Gayle Platz (cat. 43), suggesting how weavers enthusiastically incorporated found objects such as branches, bones, and beads, along with unspun fleece, into their woven structures. Susan Barton-Tait’s *Northern Lights*, 1978, for the Manulife offices in Winnipeg brings to mind Le Corbusier’s tapestry designation, muralnomad, as it integrated the interlacing techniques of weaving and knitting, so that it jumped off the wall, while cleverly invoking a sense of total enclosure through its reflections on the surfaces of the mirror-tiled walls and ceiling of the elevator lobby. Similarly, with their encircling walls, *West Coast Tree Stump*, 1972 (cat. 11), and the vast *West Coast Forest*



Susan Barton-Tait, *Northern Lights*, 1978, crocheted/felted; wool. Installed in the Manulife Building, Winnipeg, Manitoba. Photo courtesy of Susan Barton-Tait.

envelop a person as they move through them. One of Dickerson’s students observed that “[s]he teleported our minds into these amazing installations within architectural settings, transforming rooms into magical places surrounded by wool,”²⁹ illustrating how monumentality describes not only the physical size but also the emotional effect of an architectural work and the ornament that

completes it.³⁰ Fibre art like this made for powerful and exciting encounters.

Production on such a large scale could be daunting for handweavers of the studio craft movement as they were often limited in studio space, loom sizes, tools, materials, people power, and even the know-how to interpret architectural drawings and building specifications. Some architects and clients questioned “craftspeople’s professionalism, saying they can’t cost work efficiently, can’t work to a brief, can’t draw clear and detailed drawings, can’t handle complicated and large contracts, can’t collaborate well with the varying groups of people inevitably involved on public projects and can’t meet deadlines.”³¹ Canadian architect Hazen Sise was adamant that the architect “must have the final word . . . [as] the architectural design process demands this control.”³² Complaints were made that many artists who received commissions for monumental public art were “surprisingly unaware of the aesthetic determinants of architecture and the theoretical base of architectural form” that should inform their contributions.³³ Textile artists often had to acquire new skills such as reading architectural designs and building specifications, becoming aware of fluctuating light levels, researching lightfast dyes and fibre longevity, and learning to use fireproofing. A few were already exposed to these issues through their educational institutions, or, in the case of Dickerson, had the advantage of a mother who had studied architecture.³⁴ Such challenges facing artists and the potentially fraught relationships that could ensue during the commissioning process were recognized by allied arts advocate Anita Aarons, who worked tirelessly

throughout the 1960s to provide some training through her columns in the journal *RAIC Architecture Canada* and in her *Allied Arts Catalogue, Vol. 1* and *Vol. 2*. Aarons traveled throughout Canada, was aware of the expertise of Prairie textile artists and their projects, and offered aesthetic, business, and production guidelines for clients, architects, and craftspeople alike.

Fibre projects that involved virtuosic combinations of inspiration, technical proficiency, and aesthetic innovation were only possible when funders, developers, and architects created opportunities for their realization. In Canadian post-secondary institutions, many fibre art programs enthusiastically introduced requisite courses that taught design and fabrication skills and exposed their students to commission procedures.³⁵ Indeed, government programs were instrumental in commissioning works, often from these students. Between 1964 and 1978 the Canadian federal government’s program to designate one per cent of the cost of a federal building project towards the purchase of art for that building³⁶ facilitated the integration of tapestries into architectural spaces, and many provinces and corporations informally or formally adopted similar programs. Dickerson’s 1977 *Northern Lights* for the Cottage Hospital in Watson Lake, Yukon,³⁷ was acquired in this spirit, as were the *Ta-hah-sheena* rugs for the University of Regina’s Dr. John Archer Library (cat. 60). Two decades after Aarons had initially advocated for such commissions, their ongoing popularity inspired Alberta Culture to engage Alberta College of Art professor Dickerson to produce *Commissioning Visual Art: A Guide for Artists and Patrons*,

a concise and informative booklet to help artists negotiate the complex steps of the commissioning process.³⁸

Commissions for such spaces could be acquired in various ways: through direct contacts between the weavers and architects; through interventions by interior designers or art consultants acting as expert intermediaries; through cultural institutions that mediated between client, architect, and artist; and even through personal contacts. Sometimes, without jury selection, a direct invitation was issued to a specifically chosen artist; at other times, a select group of artists were approached who subsequently were juried by a committee; a third approach was to issue a public call, often circulated by provincial and federal craft or art councils. In all cases, participating artists needed to submit initial designs, maquettes, samples of materials, design rationales, and a timetable.³⁹ For *Sun Ascending* (cat. 21), Harris was initially approached by design consultant Eve Baxter, who had previously narrowed the field of potential artists, but then Harris underwent a jury selection that included corporate and architectural firm representatives. Baxter remarked that consultants had to be familiar with “what was going on in the field and who was doing what.”⁴⁰ Another commissioning method was experienced by Barton-Tait, who acquired her contract for *Northern Lights* through a general public call.⁴¹ For his first tapestry order, *Passages*, 1985, Murray Gibson was directly connected to his client by a consultant, and Brenda Campbell benefitted from the support of art consultant Carolyn Tavender, who regularly approached her during the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s regarding wall



Tapestry (Ta-hah-sheena) (cat. 60) by Marge Yuzicappi (left), c. 1970 and *Tapestry (Ta-hah-sheena)* by Bernice Runns (right), c. 1971. Installed in the Dr. John Archer Library, designed by Minoru Yamaski. Photo courtesy of University of Regina Archives and Special Collections, 90-70, Slide 109.



Margreet van Walsem, *Palaver*, 1973, tapestry; wool, natural dyes, 250 x 260 cm. SK Arts Permanent Collection, C72.11. Photo courtesy of the Margreet van Walsem Estate.



Murray Gibson, *Passages*, 1985, wool, silk and rayon, 90 x 183 cm. Installed in a primary suite bedroom. Photo by Larry MacDougal and courtesy of Murray Gibson.



Elaine Rounds, *Prairie Vistas*, 1992, Swedish Inlay on six linen panels, 1.6 x 9.1 meters. Commission for and installed in Dr. Jay Winburn's circular reception area in his Optometry office, Brandon, Manitoba. Photo courtesy of Elaine Rounds.

hangings for corporate offices.⁴² Tavender went on to act as an art consultant for the decoration of Alberta House in London, England,⁴³ a space in which several Alberta weavers, including Campbell, were consequently represented (p. 115).⁴⁴ Pirkko Karvonen recalled that her earth-toned weaving, *Westward*, c. 1980, for Westcan Bulk Transport's Edmonton boardroom, was her first of many art-consultant commissions. Acting as consultant for the furnishing of provincial government offices and for public art commissions and purchases, the Saskatchewan Arts Board facilitated the acquisition of several monumental tapestries, including the three Ta-hah-sheena wall rugs in the Dr. John Archer Library,⁴⁵ Margreet van Walsem's woven *Whites*, 1975, and her earlier immense six-panel tapestry *Palaver*, 1972, initially installed in the modernist Saskatchewan Centre of the Arts (1970), a design emerging from her concern about political and moral "justice/injustice" within Saskatchewan government practices.⁴⁶ Rather than working through an intermediary, a practice that she had found costly, Elaine Rounds preferred to receive most of her commissions for corporate spaces by means of personal contacts with the client, such as the woven multi-panel *Prairie Scene*, 1992, executed for Dr. Jay Winburn's office in Brandon, Manitoba.⁴⁷ As a 1984 British publication involved in promoting public art noted: "the institution's first task is not to choose the art but the person or persons who are going to do the choosing . . . whoever does the choosing must know a lot about current [art] and has to avoid not only the fashions but the vested interests of the art world."⁴⁸

Prairie weavers were certainly keen to tackle the commission challenges of design, materials, and fabrication to encourage living and liveable spaces. At a time when immense paintings were a sign of professional excellence, architectural weavings opened a path for textile artists to be taken seriously by the art world, thereby distancing themselves from functional domestic production that often pigeonholed them as amateurs. In the interwar years, women of the Bauhaus weaving studio and Americans such as Dorothy Liebes and Gertrude Strengell had led the way as professional weavers, who teamed up with textile manufacturers to industrially produce their texturally and materially innovative handwoven designs that were often included as functional elements in large modernist corporate spaces.⁴⁹ However, for both Liebes and Strengell, weaving's role in architectural spaces was ultimately utilitarian, a "dependent expression,"⁵⁰ "functioning architecturally—for dividing rooms, controlling light, providing insulation."⁵¹ Indeed, wall hangings and imaginative enclosures were not part of either Liebes' or Strengell's vision for the alliance of textiles and architecture. Reflecting this philosophy, Liebes referred to herself as an "artist-designer."⁵²

Prairie textile artists proved to be more flexible in their relationships with architecture than were Liebes and Strengell. Calgary's F. Douglas Motter, handweaver and founder of Douglas Motter and Associates (1961), in conjunction with weavers such as Gerd Poulsen and Brenda Campbell, wove functional yardage, including draperies, men's suiting, place mats, and lamp shades, but also embraced the opportunity to create wall hangings that enlivened public (cat. 36)

and corporate spaces across the Prairie provinces.⁵³ Harris and Karvonen, both mid-century immigrants from Finland, had formally studied textiles after initially learning to weave domestic articles from their family members, and consequently went on to work in industry with northern European designers before immersing themselves in wall hangings after arriving in Canada.⁵⁴ Karvonen, like Motter, continued to maintain a functional handweaving practice for which she was very much respected while simultaneously creating architectural weavings.⁵⁵ Heller, known in Canada for her large-scale tapestries such as *Heat*, 1983 (cat. 23), began her career working in a Polish government factory as an industrial rug designer, where most of her production was exported to the "West."⁵⁶ Not bound by ideologies that confined textiles to a limited role in architectural spaces, these Prairie weavers collaborated extensively with architects and designers to develop one-of-a-kind monumental tapestries—Canada's own muralnomads.

Rousseau-Vermette, who had worked for Liebes in 1948–49, called herself a "painter-weaver,"⁵⁷ rather than adopting Liebes' self-designation as an artist-designer. This new label highlighted that contemporary weavers created art by designing *and* making the hanging, in opposition to historic tapestry fabrication, which relied on a two-step process involving a painter who provided the design and a weaver who executed it. In the Prairies, most fibre artists worked as "painter-weavers," a statement of artistic professionalism recognizing that the weaver controlled all aspects of the process as an artist and craftsperson, an approach

in line with the Lausanne Biennials. An exception to this trend was the 1974 project initiated by Fay Loeb of Toronto, who commissioned Canadian painters to supply designs for a numbered edition of hooked rug wall hangings, with the punch-hooking process undertaken by anonymous craftspeople in Mexico.⁵⁸ This pan-Canadian initiative involved several Prairie painters, including William Pehudoff (cat. 42), who supplied designs for a limited production.⁵⁹ Loeb's marketing approach asserted that this was the first time Canadian painters were accorded the prestigious honour of having their designs made into tapestries as had previously been undertaken in France with works by European and American painters.⁶⁰ However, the comparison was not quite accurate; in the Loeb project the yarn was hooked into an existing canvas backing, a very different technique from the European practice of weaving tapestries on high- or low-warp looms. Unremarked, as well, by Loeb was the practice of American 20th-century rug hooking enterprises that had often relied on painters to supply them with modern designs, especially during the interwar years.⁶¹ The popular limited-edition Loeb tapestries were installed in office buildings throughout Canada.

As Prairie weavers realized, monumentality is not simple to achieve aesthetically or materially; the "seepage of monumentality" leaked into every aspect of their projects. Aesthetic considerations included composition, colour, physical scale, subject matter. Just blowing up a drawing or a small-scale maquette was not adequate; as modernist sculptor Anthony Caro advised, "an appropriate dynamic, a logic of enlargement

must prevail."⁶² Successful textile projects acknowledged audience viewpoints to ensure legibility of their textures and motifs from the requisite viewing distances; they considered the sizes, shapes, and configurations of walls so they would not be dwarfed by or overwhelm the space, would fit around unconventionally shaped walls, and would emphasize appropriate directionality. Colours that worked on a small scale would not necessarily translate into a large one, and for monumental spaces, bold and vibrant colours were often needed to offset the vast voids. Material considerations for weavers included securing adequate and consistent supplies of synthetic or local dyes along with natural and synthetic fibres, the appropriate equipment and tools, and, importantly, adequate studio space. Many of the designs for these immense architectural commissions had to be tailored to accommodate the size of the available looms, and so were woven in sections that were then assembled on the wall as panels. Karvonen, for example, wove the three-panel tapestry *Ekokanee*, 1977 for a Medicine Hat Burger King, while Harris included eleven panels in her 1989 monumental tapestry commissioned by Moriyama & Teshima for Ottawa City Hall.⁶³ Van Walsem's impressive *Palaver* included six panels distributed in two rows of three. While the weavers often worked from isolated home studios with restricted space, on a social level they engaged in multidimensional interactions with designers, clients, and architects. The correspondence in their archives documents the thoughtfulness required in these business relationships and financial transactions. For example, in talking about her commission *Ribbonways*,



Kaija Sanelma Harris, *Ottawa-Carleton Mural Commission*
Drawing, 1989. Photo courtesy of the Kaija Sanelma Harris Estate.



Jane Kidd, *Ribbonways*, 1982, shaped woven tapestry; wool, cotton and rayon, 2.1 x 15 meters. Installed in Eau Claire Place II, Jecco Development, Calgary, Alberta. Photo courtesy of Jane Kidd.



Kaija Sanelma Harris' Saskatoon studio while while weaving *Sun Ascending*, 1983. Photo courtesy of the Kaija Sanelma Harris Estate.

1982, for Eau Claire Place II in Calgary, Jane Kidd succinctly observes that she made a commitment from the beginning to a clear overall idea “so that my client is secure in terms of its end result.”⁶⁴ On top of aesthetic, material and spatial concerns, the seepage of monumentality into human relations involved developing clear communications

and efficiently negotiating social relations among all the key players.

Creating such monumental works entailed organization and re-organization of the lives and spaces of the makers. The immense Ta-hah-sheena hooked rugs on the walls of the Dr. John Archer Library were executed in a studio that had been converted from an old schoolhouse, as such large projects would have been impossible in busy family homes.⁶⁵ While producing the twelve-foot-high *West Coast Forest*, Dickerson realized the height of her studio fell well short of the height of her project and thus the vertical loom had to be modified so the ends could be lowered as the weaving progressed. Her studio's permeability to rain, less concerning when short-term and smaller weaving projects were undertaken, was also a worry for this year-long venture.⁶⁶ When Harris' contract was signed for *Sun Ascending*, she already had the space and the requisite looms, and “enough yarn to start and studio organized.” However, the scale of work required her to empty her space of everything external to this contract and store it elsewhere, and to rearrange her two looms so that the weavers worked back-to-back and maintained very regular nine-to-five weaving workdays.⁶⁷ Having competent weavers to help with architectural commissions of all sorts, whether one-of-a-kind tapestries or functional products, such as draperies and upholstery materials, was an important consideration. Motter regularly engaged Alberta College of Art graduates who had learned to weave, such as Paulsen, Campbell, and later Carol Little. Campbell worked with Douglas Motter and Associates for four years (1966–70) where she received

her first rya wall hanging commissions for office buildings through Tavender, who particularly appreciated her art education.⁶⁸ Such examples emphasize that, whether in terms of the monumental size of a work or its production, human expertise and professional relationships were key to a project's success.

During the later decades of the 20th century, Calgary's booming oil industry significantly impacted weaving commissions. Gibson's wool and silk *Prairie Carpet*, 1990 (cat. 14), commissioned by Esso Resources for its University of Calgary research centre, cleverly brings together Alberta's oil patch with Middle Eastern oil production. Gibson referenced kilim weaving, a technique associated with tribal weaving in the Middle East that he was researching, and the romantic concept of a magic carpet flying through the night sky over Alberta.⁶⁹ The tapestry's whimsical and abstract but subject-specific design may have helped assure its retention in the Esso collection after it was removed from its original location.⁷⁰ Another petroleum-based site-specific commission, Gibson's *Remembering the Future*, 1988, was woven for an elevator lobby in Amoco Corporation's Calgary office.⁷¹ Gibson knew in advance where his tapestry would hang and conceived a horizontal format that responded to the hallway space but also referenced the proportions of the elevator doors. Responding to the requirement in the commission brief to reference the petroleum industry, Gibson represented the seismic waves produced in petroleum exploration and their abstracted movement through the geological strata of the earth, up through the planet's habitable layer, and into the sky. In its elevator lobby



Brenda Campbell working at Douglas Motter and Associates in Calgary, Alberta, c. 1968. Photo courtesy of Brenda Campbell.

space, the tapestry celebrated the petroleum industry while critically reminding it of “the balance between contemporary economic needs and responsible stewardship for the future of the planet.”⁷² Produced at a time when the petroleum industry was, and subsequently continues to be, under pressure because of climate change and environmental degradation, Gibson's tapestry skillfully weaves together architectural setting,



Murray Gibson, *Remembering the Future*, 1988, tapestry; wool, silk and metallic fibres, 91 x 266 cm. Commissioned by and installed in the Amoco Canada Building, Calgary, Alberta. Photo by Ken Woo and courtesy of Murray Gibson.

corporate message, and design content with insightful social commentary.

Clearly, integrating this art form into architectural spaces is a complex task involving metaphorical and symbolic considerations. According to art historian and curator Miwon Kwon, the term “in situ” embraces not only a physical condition of the art, but also social, political, and cultural conditions,⁷³ as the physical location of the artwork, together with its own materiality and motifs, creates a space of social interaction that encourages conversations. The fusion of these conditions is evident in many of Gibson’s Prairie tapestries, including *Chinook Medley*, a privately funded commission for the Calgary Civic Art Collection as part of the Canada 125 celebrations in 1992 and originally hung outside the mayor’s office in the old part of Calgary City Hall.

The carefully chosen motifs reference the historic importance of both ranching and petroleum to the economic development of Calgary by tracing the history of Southern Alberta, beginning with herds of buffalo and including well-chosen motifs such as cattle brands, barbed wire fencing, and oil and gas symbols to form the “notes” on the musical staves.⁷⁴ Narrative tapestries such as those by Gibson, or multi-panel familiar landscapes such as Elaine Rounds’ 1999 *Prairie Scene* woven for the boardroom of Meyers Norris Penny, Accountants, are often best appreciated over time, whether in a series of shorter encounters or one longer viewing. Rounds proudly recalls this tapestry invariably instigated friendly conversations among those present.⁷⁵ However, when social, political, and cultural conditions shift, the conversations the tapestries evoke can become dated and the tapestries seen as irrelevant, a condition leading to a nomadic life for some works.

Landscape abstraction, a subject easily apprehended by a large audience, and perhaps more amenable to changing contexts, was especially appropriate where a harmonious and ideologically neutral integration with an interior was desired. Rounds created several landscape commissions for offices in which each room’s colour palette was carefully coordinated with the tapestry, including her multi-panel *Prairie Vistas* for an optometry office waiting room. The distribution of panels across a curved wall ensures that all who sit in the chairs placed against the wall have a view of several sections of the landscape, a perspective that Rounds conceived as a view from a porch with white pillars interrupting the landscape’s continuous horizontal flow.⁷⁶

Likewise, her five-panel Prairie landscape for Meyers Norris Penny skillfully integrates the colours of the chair upholstery and table surface.⁷⁷ Equally architectonically harmonious are other large tapestries, such as Harris' multipaneled *Fields*, 1981, in the Canadian embassy in Varsovie (Warsaw), Poland, and Karvonen's *Ekokanee* and *Westward*.⁷⁸

Jane Kidd, a weaver who has tackled many public tapestry commissions, explained their important role: "Commissioning is about putting really exciting, vibrant art in public places that stimulates people, does something for these spaces, and does something for the people who see it every day."⁷⁹ Geometric forms accomplished this efficiently and were, like landscape, accessible to a large audience. In Kidd's *Ribbonways*, woven panels stretched on a curvilinear framework and hung on three walls of the foyer of Eau Claire Place II in Calgary enlivened the space through their wave patterns and animated geometric coloured motifs. They effectively countered the grid of the building and brought attention to the main doors, invigorating this "streamlined office tower entrance."⁸⁰ Similarly, Carol Little and F. Douglas Motter's vibrantly coloured *This Bright Land*, 1976 (cat. 36), creates a rhythmical sequence of polygons that both reference and contradict the geometric regularity of the modernist architecture characteristic of Calgary at that time. An important interface between abstract geometries and specific cultural motifs occurs in the Sioux Handcraft Co-operative's *Ta-hah-sheena* installation in the Archer Library. For many people, the geometric forms in these hooked rugs were recognizable as both modernist art and as symbols aesthetically

grounded within First Nations culture. But for the Sioux makers, they had very particular meanings, often referencing specific designs passed down intergenerationally by Sioux women, with many representing a maker's personal narrative.⁸¹ In this latter example, geometric forms were not only visually dynamic; they codified community and family stories.

In some cases, weaving a history of place into a hanging enhanced its site specificity. Ann Newdigate executed a conceptually rich tapestry for Moshe Safdie's postmodern addition to Ottawa City Hall. *Many Voices/Miltunkasik*, 1994, woven in silk and mounted on canvas, integrated into its design submission instructions to the architects to respect the diverse population of Ottawa; to reinforce the point, Newdigate translated these instructions into five First Nation languages.⁸² Harris' 1989 Ottawa City Hall tapestry, commissioned by Moriyama & Teshima Architects for their modernist building, was designed to remind Ottawa civic administrators about the smaller political entities that had recently been amalgamated into the expanded Ottawa region. By interlacing the geometric forms of each municipality's shape with abstractions of the Rideau and Ottawa rivers among a grid of roads and streets, her eleven-panel weaving referenced the eleven smaller municipalities.⁸³ Despite its specific symbolic content, the tapestry, although received by the architects, was never installed in City Hall and its present location remains unknown.⁸⁴ Clearly, a great deal of conceptual thinking went into many site-specific works, making it even more unfortunate that the current locations of several impressive Prairie mural-nomads are unknown.



F. Douglas Motter, *This Bright Land*, 1976 (cat. 36)



F. Douglas Motter, *This Bright Land* (detail), 1976 (cat. 36)



Gayle Platz, *Large Tapestry Weave*, c. 1974 (cat. 43)



Installation view of *Prairie Interlace: Weaving, Modernisms, and the Expanded Frame, 1960–2000*, Nickle Galleries, 2022.

Eva Heller, *Heat*, 1983 (cat. 23)



Installation view of *Prairie Interlace: Weaving, Modernisms, and the Expanded Frame, 1960–2000*, Nickle Galleries, 2022.

William Pehudoff, *Untitled Tapestry (Loeb Commission)*, 1976 (cat. 42)

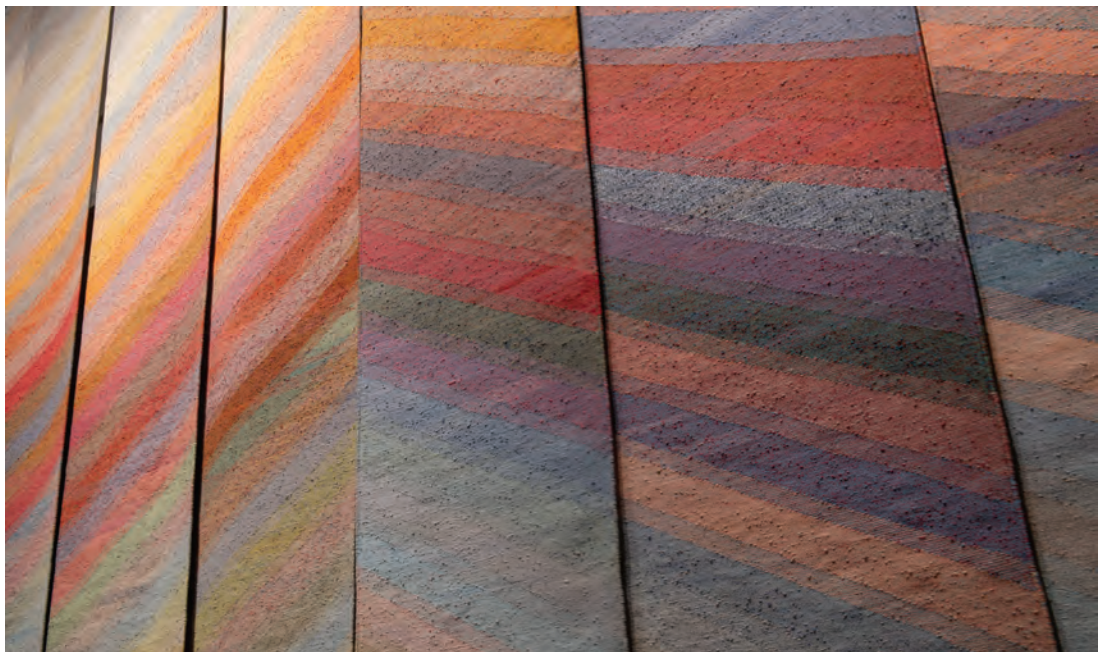


Installation view of *Prairie Interlace: Weaving, Modernisms, and the Expanded Frame, 1960–2000*, Nickle Galleries, 2022.
Murray Gibson, *Prairie Carpet*, 1990 (cat. 14)



Installation view of *Prairie Interlace: Weaving, Modernisms, and the Expanded Frame, 1960–2000*, Nickle Galleries, 2022.

Kaija Sanelma Harris, *Sun Ascending* (12 of 24 panels), 1985 (cat. 21)



Kaija Sanelma Harris, *Sun Ascending* (detail), 1985 (cat. 21)

Financial and labour investment in the scale of architectural weavings brings to our attention “the extended time-scale of its making . . . [and] an augmentation of considerations about placing, meaning and relevance, and ultimately, the extended life of the work.”⁸⁵ Will these works remain *in situ* indefinitely? What becomes of them when interior decoration is updated or building renovations take place? As muralnomads are they easily transportable? When the City of Winnipeg purchased the building displaying Barton-Tait’s *Northern Lights*, the tapestry was decommissioned and offered to its maker as a buyback, which Barton-Tait had to decline. *Northern Lights* may now be stored somewhere in Winnipeg, but its precise location is unknown.⁸⁶ Rounds was very aware that her tapestries were likely to be relocated and so hung them with Velcro to ensure an easy detachment that would not damage them. Rounds’ expansive *Prairie Vistas* is now rolled up in a collector’s storage. Despite these works unfortunately being hidden away, many public institutions have assumed the task of ensuring that architectural fibre works remain accessible to the public and to scholars. The MacKenzie Art Gallery now houses Harris’ immense *Sun Ascending* (cat. 21), decommissioned by TD due to a desire to change the building’s art, while the Alberta Foundation for the Arts safeguards several tapestries originally purchased for exhibition in Alberta’s international diplomatic spaces. Despite the many months it took to make *Palaver*, this muralnomad spent a limited time in public due to concerns about fading colours, but it remains as part of the collection of SK Arts.⁸⁷ The value of monumental fibre works

is inherently tied to the time and labour involved in their making, and by honouring and extending their lives, the cultural value of not only the tapestries, but also the makers, is honoured. Elaine Rounds recently remarked that Prairie fibre artists often worked alone in their studios and knowing that their time and energy had collective cultural value is meaningful.⁸⁸

Prairie fibre artists created monumental tapestries that performed complex roles within multiple social, cultural, political, and architectural contexts. In developing these projects, the artists and their clients sought to strike a balance between wide audience appeal for public art commissions and fibre art aesthetics that situated them within the vocabularies of contemporary art. These makers were embedded within international fibre art and architectural networks, absorbing techniques and innovative approaches from across the globe through travel, participation in international exhibitions, education, international publications, and the outreach of art and craft organizations. They translated these global perspectives into textile languages sensitive to regional concerns and interests, even cognizant of corporate messaging, within specific architectural spaces—spaces that were often tied equally to global systems through international Modernism. Through visual languages and sensuous materials, they built bridges between institutions, the public, and artists. Tasked with creating living and liveable spaces, often within vast, brutalist concrete structures or later, ones dominated by glass and steel, tapestries provided physical and emotional warmth through their metaphorical associations, colour and textural

variations, experiments with monumental forms, and their roles as social agents in instigating conversations. But because tapestries are portable, muralnomads as Le Corbusier suggested, removal from their original sites has meant some have disappeared and, in several cases, their very survival is at risk. *Prairie Interlace* is a reminder of the need

to safeguard these tapestries. Monumental architecture requires human inhabitants, and architectural textiles help people mark physical and psychic trajectories through corridors large and small. Acting as cultural maps, inspiring conversations, and piquing intellectual curiosity, these muralnomads generate living spaces.



NOTES

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