

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Textile Society of America Symposium  
Proceedings

Textile Society of America

---

2010

## Low Tech Transmission: European Tapestry to High Tech America

Christine Laffer

christine.laffer@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf>



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#)

---

Laffer, Christine, "Low Tech Transmission: European Tapestry to High Tech America" (2010). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 31.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/31>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

**LOW TECH TRANSMISSION: EUROPEAN TAPESTRY TO HIGH TECH AMERICA**

CHRISTINE LAFFER  
[christine.laffer@gmail.com](mailto:christine.laffer@gmail.com)

The purpose of this paper is to talk about how European tapestry weaving came to the U.S. in order to explain what happened after it got here particularly with regards to contemporary practices and concerns. To do this, I want to revisit certain parts of the past 120 years in order to examine specific cases where tapestry as a cultural transmission of practical skills was received, created local reverberation patterns, and was re-transmitted.



*Figure 1. Interior of a period room by Stanford White of McKim, Mead & White. (Hunter, pl. 25)*

We start in 1893 in New York City. Jean Foussadier, recently arrived from Aubusson, France, wove a small tapestry chair seat with a floral wreath design in the first American workshop. William Baumgarten, director of William Baumgarten & Co., needed it for display to clients. He set up this tapestry workshop as part of launching his interior design and furnishing business. His competitors, particularly Herter Brothers, had nothing like it. Baumgarten instigated this transmission of old world techniques to new world location because he had clients who wanted tapestry in their decor. (Fig 1)

The various revival styles<sup>1</sup> of the 1880s and 90s arose in an era of spending. By that time, the first generation of industrial moguls powered by the growth economy of the 1870s had passed on huge amounts of money to their heirs. Railroads built across the wide spaces of the central plains created a river of wealth that flowed to families like the Vanderbilts, Carnegies, Schwabs, and many others, who could then afford to build and furnish new mansions. The fashion for period rooms caused many orders for complete sets of furniture, including upholsteries, carpets, and tapestries.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> David C. Huntington's essay in *The Quest for United: American Art Between World's Fairs 1876-1893* gives an insightful commentary on the changes in aesthetics that occurred as tapestry made its debut in America. "If there is a conception of culture analogous to Darwin's conception of nature, it would surely be that of Darwin's compatriot Matthew Arnold. In *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), Arnold developed a constellation of ideas that are indispensable to an understanding of this period. [...] Anglo-American culture, he argued, was too narrow, exclusive, and moralistic. It had thus allowed itself to be deprived of many of history's greatest riches. Arnold's prescription to the present was to comb the past accomplishments of humanity in order to sift out the best for emulation and inspiration. [...] A more secular, more cosmopolitan view of life and the world was urgently needed." (p.11-12)

<sup>2</sup> A case in point is the Vanderbilt mansion built for Frederick William Vanderbilt in Hyde Park, New York completed around 1898. "The versatile Glaenzer's Gold room is a textbook example of a 'period room,' where all of the furniture and ornaments follow the Rococo style of Louis XV. The tall case clock, a copy of one in the Louvre, was reproduced by Paul Sormani, one of the finest cabinetmakers in late 19th century Paris. Another room that

Prior to 1893, Baumgarten and other furnishers like Stanford White, went to France and England to purchase antique pieces in good condition and shipped them back home.<sup>3</sup> This task grew difficult as demand outgrew supply. Some buyers began to commission works abroad. Ten years earlier, in 1882, Baumgarten traveled to England's Royal Windsor Tapestry Works in order to check the progress made on a set of tapestries for Cornelius Vanderbilt II's mansion on Fifth Avenue. At that time about one hundred people were employed at the Old Windsor studio, most of them French. One of the weavers he met there was Jean Foussadier.<sup>4</sup> (Fig 2)



*Figure 2. Jean Foussadier, right, warping loom in Baumgarten studio. (Hunter, pl.251)*

Baumgarten's tapestry workshop succeeded on a scale that is hard to imagine today. At its height they had twenty-two looms and employed around seventy people, most of them from France. Helen Candee, in her book on tapestry written in 1912 mentioned his workshop as "the colony on the Bronx" and said it "is like a bit of old Europe set intact on American soil."<sup>5</sup>

This successful transmission to a new continent, from France via England to New York, had a twist. America had a very different market structure due to its fast-growing economy and the omnivorous nature of customers' interests. In a very tangible way, Americans were importing cultural traditions as the latest fashion to try on and keep or discard. This differed from the European preference for guarding their heritage with tenacity, of relying on state controls to limit competition and then exporting their products.

---

appears to have been lifted bodily from 18th century France is Louise Vanderbilt's bedroom, by Ogden Codman. The commodes and writing desk came from Sormani's shop. His case pieces carry his name in delicate script on the locks of the drawers. The settee, daybed, and chairs are also reproductions, and the rug from the Savonnerie was made to fit this room." Source: <http://www.hvnet.com/houses/vanderbilt> -- the Hudson Valley Network guide for information on the region. Text supplied by NPS Official Map & Guide and from brochure produced by the Roosevelt-Vanderbilt Historical Association by Marge Farnett.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., "In the principal rooms of the first floor, the hand of Stanford White is as clear as if he had signed his name. The flamboyant partner of McKim, Mead, and White influenced the house plan from its inception by furnishing a carved wooden dining room ceiling. To be incorporated as a whole, the ceiling must have dictated the proportions of that room and thus its opposite wing, the drawing room. White probably purchased the ceiling -- along with the large Isphahan rug and stone chimney breasts in the dining room, the Renaissance chairs in the entrance hall, the marble columns in the drawing room, and assortment of tapestries -- on one of his expeditions abroad. He searched Europe for relics which he shipped home. He was then prepared to supply clients with original works of art that lent authenticity to the background he was designing for them. In 1897 White traveled to London, Paris, Florence, Rome and Venice in search of articles for the mansion at Hyde Park."

<sup>4</sup> Alice Zrebiec, p.7.

<sup>5</sup> Helen Candee, p. 262.

The model of a tapestry workshop does look something like a medieval village, as Candee noted above. A few people manage incoming yarn supplies with dyers tracking the color range that the weavers want to use. Weavers work side by side at large looms and have a skill hierarchy from apprentice to master. Repairers occupy another room where they sew slits, finish edges and fix any anomalies. Designers have another studio for creating maquettes and full scale cartoons. All of these functions are housed within one compound. This model has been used for hundreds of years at workshops formed in Aubusson, Paris, Old Windsor, Merton Abbey, New York City, and is still used today. (Fig 3)



*Figure 3. Tapestry cartoon designed for Baumgarten & Co. (Candee, p.231)*

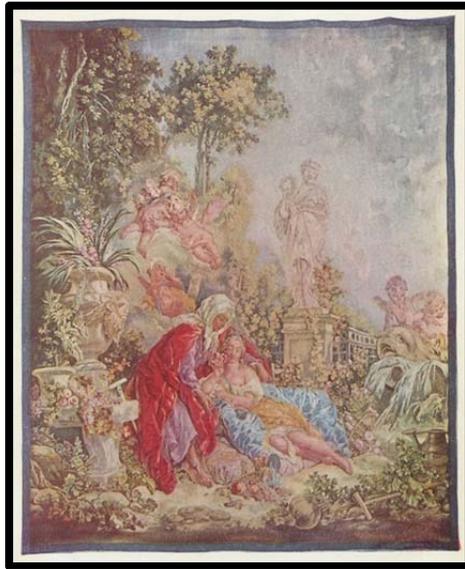
As a prototype it has proven remarkably stable and easy to transmit. It also has had an enormous effect on the type of tapestry that gets produced. One of its most noticeable traits involves the separation of designer and weaver. A designer might spend time in the weaving studio but she is not trained as a weaver, and vice versa. The separation between the two can become quite distant in time and space, where a cartoon travels from one country to another, or where a cartoon gets purchased by another studio.



*Figure 4. William Baumgarten & Co., Gothic Hunting Tapestry. (Candee, p.262)*

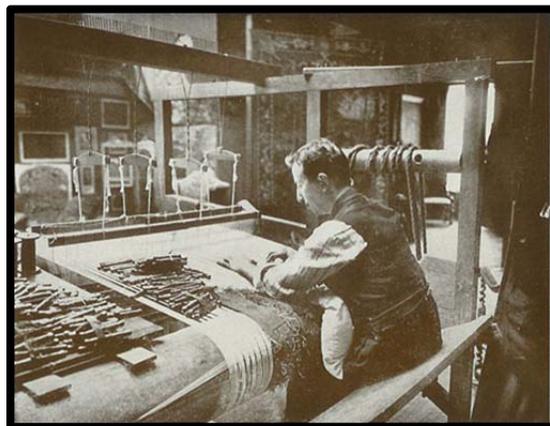
Once set up, the studio becomes both client-hungry and design-hungry. At Baumgarten & Company they wove tapestries that would fit with a revival decor from a Louis XVth sitting room to a neo-Gothic great hall, or to evoke a hunting lodge. (Fig 4)

Some of their tapestries took on American themes, for example "Westerward, Ho" after a painting by Emanuel Leutze who was known for his "Washington Crossing the Delaware." They wove another titled "Robin Hood." In general, however, the tapestries of the Baumgarten studio stayed firmly within well-known European styles because that was what the weavers knew well how to weave. This meant largely verdures -- forest scenes with a bucolic air of timelessness and if they included figures, they sat or reclined draped in the style of Boucher. (Fig 5)



*Figure 5. Boucher tapestry, "Courtiers at Ease," c. 1760. (Hunter, frontispiece)*

Innovation took place through the people who made the cartoons as they responded to and searched for clients. Although successful, Baumgarten's studio had clear stylistic limitations. When he died in 1908, followed by the studio's closure in 1910, two new studios formed. In 1909 Albert Herter established Herter Looms and in 1910 Lorentz Kleiser, who had worked for Baumgarten as a designer, founded his own tapestry studio in New York that became the Edgewater Looms upon its relocation to nearby New Jersey.<sup>6</sup> (Fig 6)



*Figure 6. Herter Looms, weaver formerly of Baumgarten & Co., at low warp loom. (Candee, p.228)*

---

<sup>6</sup> Alice Zrebiec, p.13.

Each of these successor workshops moved away from the aesthetics of Baumgarten while simultaneously carrying traces of them. Influenced by the work of William Morris at Merton Abbey and the Arts and Crafts Movement,<sup>7</sup> Herter worked in a romanticized medieval style but began to develop more heroic American themes. However, as his reputation and commissions for mural paintings rose, he lost interest in tapestry. By the early 20's he withdrew from the workshop's operations, although they managed to continue on without him until closing their doors in 1934.<sup>8</sup> (Fig 7)



*Figure 7. Herter Looms, "Dryads and Fauns," 1910. (Candee, p.263)*

Kleiser's workshop had its busiest years during the 1920s. His designs for tapestry ranged from his own version of a Gothic style to his more adventurous compositions with bold fantastical forms and a touch of Art Nouveau. After the Stock Market Crash of 1929, Kleiser attempted to move his center of activities to California without success. The Edgewater Looms closed in 1933.

The first transmission of European tapestry techniques faded and left almost no trace. It is likely that many of the weavers returned to Aubusson or found other employment. Public institutions hold a small record of that era. The majority of works ended up in private collections of families, hotels, companies, and universities. Very little has remained in the public eye for subsequent generations.

The next cultural transmission of tapestry emerged between the 1930s and 1950s. Modernism began to form a new aesthetic which appeared at international trade fairs, art exhibitions and in magazines.

In 1936, for example, the Bignou Gallery in New York had a show of modern tapestries designed by artists such as Braque, Picasso, Dufy, and Matisse, all from Madame Cuttoli's collection.<sup>9</sup> Marie Cuttoli played an unusual role in France. She called herself an editeur -- essentially a facilitator and promoter -- who set up working arrangements between artists and workshops. This model opened up the range of visual possibilities in tapestry through the interaction of modern artist and traditional weaver. It allowed tapestry to find an expression that fit a modern interior.

---

<sup>7</sup> The Arts and Crafts movement had strong cultural transmissions both ways across the Atlantic between England and America and is germane to this topic. Wendy Kaplan, in *"The Art that is Life": The Arts & Crafts Movement in America, 1875-1920*, stated on p.52: "In America, however, the zenith of the Arts and Crafts movement took place a generation later, between 1890 and 1910, and was characterized by the dramatic blossoming of societies, guilds, and classes, all of which had direct roots in England." She notes further on p. 56: "Within a decade hundreds of societies had been formed and were disseminating Arts and Crafts ideals across the country through exhibitions, salesrooms, periodicals, and classes." It seems quite probable that the breadth of this influence set the stage for a transition to the artist-weaver model as mentioned in the next section. This would parallel the development of the studio arts movement as presented by Janet Koplos and Bruce Metcalf in *Makers: A History of American Studio Craft*.

<sup>8</sup> Alice Zrebiec, p. 153-154.

<sup>9</sup> Courtney Ann Shaw, p. 93.

Picking up on this idea, a second editeur, an American named Gloria F. Ross started creating tapestries in New York City. She began in 1954 with needlepoint interpretations of paintings by Helen Frankenthaler, switching around 1963 to a hooked rug technique. By 1969-70 she made connections with tapestry workshops and started sending paintings to the Dovecot Studio in Edinburgh, and shortly thereafter to Pinton in Felletin next door to Aubusson.<sup>10</sup> As her understanding of the process matured, she moved towards a collaborative model and sought studios that had empathy and understanding of a particular artist's work. I will revisit this idea of collaboration shortly.

Also between the 1930s and 1950s, a slightly different transmission came with the arrival of two textile designer-weavers. Anni Albers came to this country in 1933 after teaching at the Bauhaus, and Trude Guermonprez a bit later in 1947.

They both taught at Black Mountain College and they both left in 1949. As innovators, they showed their students ways to develop modern fabrics as well as experimental one-of-a-kind productions. Albers had a major show in 1949 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York which then traveled around the country. Guermonprez went west and ended up chairing the crafts department at the California College of the Arts in the 1960s and 70s. They personified a different studio model where an individual artist designs and weaves their own work using a variety of commercially available as well as natural and found materials.

This switch in studio model from a large workshop to a one-woman studio coincided with the adoption of a modern aesthetic. Accompanied by changes in the marketplace, everything about modern tapestry appeared to have completely transformed. Tapestries -- now more loosely defined -- were woven by creative artist-craftsmen who might not even have a cartoon to follow. No longer commissioned by those with wealth, modern tapestries were put on display in a gallery or at an art fair and were supposed call to customers with the siren song of modernism. It was a remarkable change.

And it was not quite a complete revolution. Although we have a portrayal of a huge transformation, we have actually glossed over the very real production issues that lie at the heart of tapestry's labor-intensive methods. From the inception of the fiber art movement, tapestry techniques posed a problem. They couldn't be truly modernized unless one of three things happened: a) the techniques were modified, b) more weavers were used in a modern way, or c) the work took on a smaller scale. Each of these options was pursued by different artists from the late 1960s on into the 1990s.



*Figure 8. Yael Lurie and Jean Pierre Larochette, "Moonlight Bird," 1981.*

---

<sup>10</sup> Gloria F. Ross Center for Tapestry Studies, website: [http://tapestrycenter.org/?page\\_id=72](http://tapestrycenter.org/?page_id=72)

Meanwhile, as professors in upper level education programs were encouraging new approaches to tapestry, they simultaneously found excitement when pouring over archeological textiles. Collecting cloths from pre-Columbian Peruvian burials, or Coptic fragments, for example, led to an increased interest in many historic weaves, including tapestry. Paradoxically, the university system gave tapestry technique a foothold and a refuge in its arts education system even as it sought to alter our view of what a tapestry should be.

This brings us to the last transmission of European tapestry technique which occurred in 1972 when Jean Pierre Larochette and his wife Yael Lurie arrived in Berkeley, California. (Fig 8)

Trained in his father's workshop in Patagonia, Argentina, Larochette brought Aubusson methods again to the U.S., just as Jean Foussadier had done 79 years prior. In fact, Armand Larochette had spent a year working at one of the tapestry studios in New York City, probably in the late 1920s. He purchased a Harley motorcycle which he was photographed driving through the streets of Aubusson. A few years later he went to South America.<sup>11</sup>

From 1973 to 1975, Jean Pierre Larochette taught summer sessions in tapestry at San Francisco State University. Then in 1977, after the successful exhibition "Five Centuries of Tapestry" at the Fine Arts Museum's Palace of the Legion of Honor, he and three graduate students of the textile arts program -- Ernestine Bianchi, Phoebe McAfee and Ruth Tanenbaum (nee Dundas) -- founded the San Francisco Tapestry Workshop with Larochette as director.

The San Francisco Tapestry Workshop relied in part on the old model. They wove tapestries on commission with newly trained American weavers. Mark Adams, a local tapestry designer who had worked with Jean Lurçat in France, was one among several artists who had tapestries woven on these looms. Although Larochette believed strongly in team work between artists and weavers, his conceptualization was difficult to convey in practice.

Lurie and Larochette now live and work as a two-person studio. They have in the past described their relationship in traditional terms where Lurie creates the cartoon and Larochette weaves it. However, they have made concerted efforts to describe the collaborative nature of their projects and their mutual participation in all phases of realization. Collaboration has let them establish a third stable studio model, one that focuses on a middle path formed out of the old model and the modern one.<sup>12</sup> The importance of collaboration echoes the kind of change that Gloria F. Ross also sought as she developed personal working relationships with Archie Brennan at the Dovecot and then from 1979 to 1997 with Mary Lee Begay and other Navajo Nation weavers.

The pattern I see, however, is that once the old model reasserts itself, it dominates the other two options. Economies of scale cause the large workshop to act as a mouthpiece for its tapestry message and have the effect of setting their work as a benchmark of quality. When the old model co-exists with individual artist-weavers and collaborative methods, the large workshop enters the arena as a cultural heavyweight. Any success attained by the two smaller frameworks is more fragile since they depend upon smaller more

---

<sup>11</sup> Discussed in private conversation with Jean Pierre Larochette, September, 2010, which he clarified in an email in December, 2010: "[A]fter his graduation from LENAD (Aubusson's art school) he was employed as an interior decorator by the Parisian firm Jansen, and subsequently also traveled on assignments to Brazil and Argentina. It was in this capacity that he worked with weavers, later on opening his own interior decoration and antiques gallery (run by my mother in the Recoleta neighborhood of Buenos Aires [...]) establishing his own tapestry workshop, employing up to 20 weavers during the 1930s and 40s [...]."

<sup>12</sup> Yael Lurie and Jean Pierre Larochette, *Water Songs Tapestries: Notes on Designing, Weaving and Collaborative Work*.

fragmented interactions with art market mechanisms. And yet, during the past twenty years, the newer studio models seem to have taken the lead. Large workshops do not operate in the U.S. at this time.



*Figure 9, left. Deann Rubin, "Bocce Ball," 1986, collection of Laura and John Blumenfeld.*

*Figure 10, right. Christine Laffer, "Glove of Incapacity: Sensitivity Test," 1997.*

For contemporary American tapestry artists, an echo of those earlier working methods separates the design phase from the weaving phase. Artists create drafts of their images in a variety of ways whether sketched, painted, collaged, photographed, or manipulated in PhotoShop. Skills developed in graphic art media helped shape the tension between real and abstract space in a piece such as Deann Rubin's *Bocce Ball*, 1986, methods which were taken over by image manipulation computer programs shortly thereafter. (Fig 9)

Often working from found images which they assemble or disassemble, artists will today include a search of the internet just as one might sort through old newspapers or family photo albums, and might subsequently manipulate them via photocopiers and scanners. By this method of image first and tapestry second, we link our studio practice indirectly to the long heritage of European tapestry methods.

This low tech weaving method came to America, was tried and tested in the same way as any other technology might be, by putting it to work. Contemporary weavers today continue that process. (Fig 10)

### Afterword

Since the technology of tapestry weaving appears to remain static over long periods of time -- an assumption that deserves scrutiny -- there has been more emphasis on an explanation of each artist's design and thought processes prior to weaving when describing works produced after the mid-1970s. This separation between design and production (cartoon and weaving) raises many issues including that of translation. For example, while at Gobelins in 1984-5 they stated clearly their position that the artist of a design should not and could not act as its translator. Most contemporary tapestry artists in America take the opposite view in that their design process involves a series of working drafts prior to achieving its final form in tapestry. Others attempt to resolve the split by refusing to make prior sketches and relying on a method that involves a systematic weave. A few artists design *as if they were weaving* and each mark therefore represents a specific woven element. The work of collaborative teams would likely reveal other approaches. An examination of these issues can take place only after a clarification of the underlying practice of separation which is the motive for the present paper.

## **Bibliography**

Candee, Helen Churchill. *The Tapestry Book*, New York: Tudor Publishing Co., 1912.

Hunter, George Leland. *Tapestries Their Origin, History and Renaissance*, New York: John Lane Company, 1912.

Huntington, David C.; Detroit Institute of Arts. *The Quest for Unity: American Art Between World's Fairs 1876-1893*, Detroit, Michigan: Detroit Institute of Arts, 1983.

Kaplan, Wendy. *"The Art That is Life": The Arts & Crafts Movement in America, 1875-1920*, Bulfinch Press: Boston, Massachusetts, 1987.

Lurie, Yael and Larochette, Jean Pierre. *Water Songs Tapestries: Notes on Designing, Weaving and Collaborative Work*, Berkeley, California: Genesis Press, 2008.

Shaw, Courtney Ann. *The Rise of the Artist/Weaver: Tapestry Weaving in the United States from 1930-1990*, Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms International, 1992.

Zrebiec, Alice. *The American Tapestry Manufactures: Origins and Development, 1893 to 1933*, Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms International, 1980.