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The Swedish Presence in 20th-Century American Weaving

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Swedish weavers who arrived in the United States in the early 20th century before World War I found handweaving a dying art in the United States, but their own skills were valued. American textile mills produced inexpensive and vast quantities of fabrics, but there was also growing interest in reviving the lost arts and crafts of the Colonial and pioneer eras. Influence from the European Arts and Crafts movement and the Bauhaus design philosophy was growing in modern America. These factors created new opportunities for a revival of handweaving.

Sweden, by contrast, had retained its strong craft tradition in the face of late-arriving industrialization. A system of preservation societies and craft training in the folk (free public) schools and in arts and crafts schools in Sweden meant that such skills were widely known and valued. For Americans interested in weaving in the early 20th century, Sweden and Swedish sources became an important source of knowledge, equipment, tools, yarns, books and personal instruction. Swedish weavers taught fine, traditional weaving in several American craft communities, art centers, schools and colleges prior to WWII. Some Americans visited Sweden and other Scandinavian countries in search of weaving education and inspiration, a cross-cultural experience that continues, enhanced by computer access.

This study highlights Swedish weavers whose presence was featured in American weaving and craft publications and organizations. *The Handicrafter, Handweaver & Craftsman, Shuttle, Spindle and Dyepot* and *Handwoven* magazines between 1924 and 1970 were examined and followed up with archival research and personal interviews.

Swedish immigration to the United States was at its peak in the 1880s' and continued strongly until the 1930s, totaling 1.1 million Swedes settling in America between 1851 and 1930.¹ When Anna Ernberg arrived from Sweden with her family in New York City in 1897, she quickly found opportunities to teach weaving at Pratt Institute and Columbia Teachers College in that city. She sold her weaving, took commissions and lectured. She had grown up with the Swedish handicraft preservation movement in southern Sweden and had studied weaving at a *slöjd* school in Blekinge. She was eager “to help Americans revive their lost heritage by teaching the Colonial home art of handweaving.” Collectors brought coverlets for her to evaluate. Berea College in Kentucky invited her to take over direction of its Fireside Industries program, a job she held from 1911 to 1936.² Efforts to help the Appalachian mountain people regain craft skills were undertaken by several missionary and educational groups around the turn of the century. Handwoven coverlets and other craft items were sold to augment family income and encourage personal pride in the work. At least two of these centers hired Swedish weaving instructors: Berea College and Tullula Falls School, Georgia.³

¹ Lars Ljungmark, *Swedish Exodus* (Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, IL., 1979), 10-12.

² Anna Ernberg, handwritten questionnaire, “History of Swedes in America 1638-1938” Questionnaire for Biography,” original at The Swedish Museum, Philadelphia. Biographical material also in Record Group Faculty and Staff Personnel, Berea College Archives.

³ Ashley Callahan, “The Arts and Crafts Collection at Tullulah Falls School,” draft of paper, personal copy from the author. Ester Carlson from the University of Uppsala taught weaving in 1927 a year at Tullula Falls

Ernberg's task was to run a workshop where college students were shown how to weave products and to work with mountain weavers. She focused on making the workshop a profitable source of income and promoted the school and the mountain weavers on her fundraising trips North and East.⁴ She continued Berea's early work with mountain women who could still spin and weave and do natural dyeing, and recorded their coverlet weave structures. With three Swedish looms that she obtained, she pointed out that the school could make its own looms using these examples. Indeed, the small, portable loom she designed and sold was popular with other mountain-area schools and individuals. Ernberg also raised funds for the Log House (1917) housing a workshop, sales room and apartment and for the Sunshine Ballard Cottage (1921) still the student workshop.⁵ She was praised for her accomplishments, but she also had her critics, who found her difficult to work with and criticized the weaving of items like handbags and table runners and towels that were not part of the mountain home tradition.⁶

When Ernberg was hired, the college president had warned her not to bring in "foreign patterns." She was to revive the traditional designs, which she derived from scraps of paper and samples. The overshot technique used for most mountain coverlets also used in Swedish and European weaving. Philis Alvic in *Weavers of the Southern Highlands* points out that other typical Scandinavian weave structures were not introduced, but on her own time Ernberg wove pictorial tapestries in a Swedish style.⁷ Ernberg wrote that she worked in the spirit of Ruskin and Morris -- "everything useful made beautiful."⁸ We "need not show anything new, nothing foreign," but she wanted her weavers to make fabrics as good as their mothers and grandmothers had made.⁹ Some of her students became teachers in other mountain schools. Ernberg made one return visit to Sweden in 1931, where she was praised for her American work. She retired and died in 1940 in Berea.

Ernberg's influence rippled out through the mountain areas and beyond by means of favorable publicity in the newspapers and magazines. Lucy Morgan, who was teaching at the missionary Appalachian School at Penland, North Carolina, wanted to promote handweaving in her region. She spent the winter of 1923 at Berea in a short daily class with Ernberg, supplemented by weaving in her own room on an Ernberg loom. Morgan brought three of the small looms back to her school and began a successful weaving program for the region. Then in 1929, Morgan founded the Penland School of Handicrafts in 1929, today one of the top arts and crafts schools in the country.¹⁰

But Penland's connection to Swedish sources, was perhaps most importantly influenced by Edward F. Worst (1866-1949), a leading educator and supervisor of manual training education in the Chicago public schools between 1905 and 1935. Worst, a son of German immigrants and native of Lockport, Illinois, completed high school and teacher training in Chicago and was greatly influenced by the reform education philosophies of Francis Parker and John Dewey and

⁴ Philis Alvic, *Weavers of the Southern Highlands* (Lexington: U of Kentucky Press, 2003), 49.

⁵ Alvic, *Weavers*, 154. See also chapters 3 and 9.

⁶ Sarah S. Broomfield, "Weaving Social Change: Berea College, Fireside Industries and Reform in Appalachia," seminar paper for Textile Society of America Symposium, Toronto, October 12, 2006.

⁷ Alvic, *Weavers*, 158.

⁸ Examples of traditional Kentucky weaving are in Anna Ernberg, "Ruskin's Ideal for Humble Homes," *Berea Quarterly*, January 1912, 15-23

⁹ Alvic, *Weavers*, 42, Broomfield, student paper 2001 private copy.

¹⁰ Lucy Morgan with LeGette Blythe, *Gift from the Hills* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: U of North Carolina Press, 1958).

the Arts and Crafts Movement.¹¹ He first studied weaving at Lowell Textile School in Lowell, Mass (1906) where he learned enough to begin teaching the craft. He was disappointed in the industrial emphasis at Lowell, and continued his weaving education in Sweden on study trips in 1908 and 1912, including work at the noted Johanna Brunsson's Vavskola in Stockholm, and Nääs Manual Training School near Gothenburg. Worst organized a small group of local Swedish weavers in Lockport that produced table linens. He designed and sold a Swedish style "Lockport loom" with Gustav Sandbloom, a Swedish cabinetmaker in the 1930s. His book, *Foot-Power Loom Weaving* (1918), apparently the first modern American text in weaving instruction, and it featured 191 Swedish weaving patterns out of 285 examples.¹² Lucy Morgan learned about him, went to Chicago for private lessons and invited him to visit Penland in 1928, where he set up a multiple harness loom. He taught weaving every summer until 1946, in Penland's annual summer Weaving Institutes beginning in 1929. Worst also arranged for the Penland Weavers and Potters to demonstrate and sell their crafts at the Carolina Cabin in the Century of Progress fair in Chicago in 1933.¹³

Penland's Swedish exchange continued with students and teachers from Sweden and other Scandinavian countries who visited, studied and taught at Penland. They included Ingeborg Longbers, one of the two sisters heading Sätergläntan craft school in Dalecarlia, Sweden, who taught modern weaving design in 1947 and 1948, and Inge Werther Krok, who came in 1955 to teach damask weaving on an imported Swedish draw loom.¹⁴ The weaving magazines of the 1940s and 1950s often reported on textile study tours to Sweden and publicized the work of Swedish and Scandinavian weavers. Longbers later came to the USA to teach at the University of Tennessee and Cornell University. Morgan finally took a group to visit the much-admired craft schools and centers in Scandinavia that she had been learning about.¹⁵ While there, she noted that the weaving done in Sweden was very similar to that taught at Penland by Mr. Worst. She recognized in the centuries-old Scandinavian patterns the designs the mountain women called "Braddock's Defeat," "Whig Rose," "Mount Vernon" and others.¹⁶

No doubt other Swedish immigrants carried on with spinning and weaving in their new homes in Swedish settlements in Minnesota, Washington, the Dakotas, Nebraska and Illinois, but only a few are mentioned in the literature. Margaret Bergman, (1872-1948) for example, came from Sweden in 1902 and settled in the Seattle, Washington area at Pilsbo on the Kitsap Peninsula. After raising her large family, she returned to her weaving loom and began producing and selling rugs and tablecloths. In 1935 she taught weaving at a Seattle department store and with her students formed the Tacoma Weavers Guild, first in the state. She designed two looms and the family built and sold them for about 40 years. She taught weaving in Tacoma, at Penland and at the Little Loomhouse in Louisville, Kentucky, and at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, D.C. She developed a new weave structure, the "Margret Bergman" technique, and continued perfecting it until her death in 1948. The Nordic Heritage Museum of Seattle featured her work and the looms and donated her textile collection to the museum in 1992.¹⁷

¹¹ Olivia Mahoney, *Edward F. Worst, Craftsman and Educator, exhibition catalog, Chicago Historical Society, 1985, 10.*

¹² Edward F. Worst, *Foot-Power Loom Weaving* (NY: Dover, reprint, 1974).

¹³ Mahoney, 37.

¹⁴ List of teachers, Penland archive.

¹⁵ Morgan, chapters 23-26.

¹⁶ Morgan, 242.

¹⁷ "The Weavings of Margaret and Arthur Bergman," catalog, The Nordic Heritage Museum, Seattle, 1992.

“Mama” Valborg Gravander (1888-1978) is probably the most colorful and fondly remembered Swedish weaver in California. With her husband, she developed a Swedish cultural boarding house in San Francisco, where from 1924-1945 she taught weaving and spinning, sold Swedish crafts, and arranged Swedish dinners and fests complete with folk dancing. She was a regular participant in craft fairs and demonstrations and workshops, where she often appeared in her national Swedish costume. Although she taught traditional Swedish weaving, some of her students later went on to work in the studio of Dorothy Liebes, who was making a national reputation for her colorful contemporary designs. Maja Albee, who boarded and studied with for six years with Gravander, demonstrated weaving at the Golden Gate Exposition 1938-39, arranged by Liebes.¹⁸ Gravander’s sisters were also weavers and the four sisters’ work was featured at the deYoung Museum in 1938. cite sources One sister, Sara Matsson Anliot, taught for five years at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, and in the 1950s in Cleveland at the Institute of Art, Cleveland College and WYCA.¹⁹

Mandelina Oberg from Nordmaling emigrated to Minnesota in 1906 and raised her family in Deerwood before she returned to spinning and weaving. She raised flax and goats and spun linen and wool. She was featured in the film “Homespun” made by the *Encyclopedia Britannica* in 1952.²⁰ In Hartland, Michigan, Mrs. Martina Lindahl, a Swedish weaver, taught and made items for sale in this craft village during the 1930s. She developed her own versions of Whig Rose, Honeysuckle and Swedish Lace.²¹

Even today Becky’s Väv Stuga offers a Swedish style weaving school in Shelburne, Mass. Becky Ashenden not only teaches, but also translates and publishes weaving books, perhaps the only contemporary example by a young woman who fell in love with handweaving through her studies in 1981 at Sätergläntan north of Stockholm. She returned the states to become a professional weaver and open her own teaching studio.²²

Most students of American handweaving would recognize Mary Miegs Atwater as the leading figure in the revival of American handweaving for her important book, *The Shuttle-Craft Book of American Hand-Weaving* (1928), her national newsletter founded in 1924 and correspondence weaving course that set standards and attitudes in the formative 1930s and 1940s. But Atwater also looked to the Swedish sources. “The Swedish government encourages hand-weaving by setting up standards, sponsoring schools, and employing skilled weavers and spinners to go out through the country districts to teach the women on the farms,” she wrote. When Atwater first wanted to learn to weave in 1916, she said, “the only sources of information were the coverlets and whatever the Swedish weavers in the country were willing to give out in the way of inspiration, plus a few old manuscript books.”²³ In her publications she also included Swedish patterns like Jämtlandsdräll (renamed crackle), double weave pickup, and rya/pile rugs, and referred readers to Swedish language weaving books available in the Swedish book shop in New York City. *Handicrafter* magazine listed five Swedish weaving books it had imported to

¹⁸ Dorothy Bryan, “Mama” Gravander, *Handweaver and Craftsman*, Fall 1945, 4-7,54, and audio interview tape by Maja Albee Stamfl, American River College, Sacramento, 1977.

¹⁹ Dorothy Bryan, “Sara Matsson Anliot,” *Handweaver and Craftsman*, Summer 1960, 10-12.

²⁰ Mary R. Herman, “Mandelina Oberg, Minnesota Handweaver and Spinner, *Handwoven* #59. “Homespun,” 20-minute color/sound film (Chicago: International Film Bureau, 1952).

²¹ Patti Aikin, Waldenwoods-Weaving in Hartland. Undated originals, Hartland Public Library, Hartland.

²² Becky’s Väv Stuga home page, biography.

²³ Mary Atwater, *The Shuttle-Craft Book of American Hand-Weaving* (NY: Macmillan, 1928) 17.

sell to its readers in summer 1930 including Montell-Glantzburg *Vävboken* and Bjork's *Ny Vävbok*.²⁴

Marguerite Porter Davison's *A Handweaver's Pattern Book* (1944) still a must in the weaver's library credited "years of work with Mrs. Anna Ernberg at Berea College and her high standard for handwork," for laying the foundation for this book.²⁵ Davidson worked at the college and studied with Ernberg from 1912 to 1916. Most American handweavers consider this book a must, but they also use several Swedish weaving books, including swatch books by Malin Selander and Ulla Cyrus' *Manual of Swedish Hand Weaving* (1956).

Americans sought out weaving instruction in Sweden. Because of her fluency in Swedish, Hilma Berglund, a first-generation Swedish-American from Stillwater, Minnesota, (near Minneapolis) was admitted as a special student to Handarbetets Vänner (HV) in Stockholm in 1922. She was teaching craft classes, but wanted better foundation in weaving. HV Students worked morning and afternoon copying traditional Swedish patterns. "Why do we have to copy patterns only" she asked. The teacher responded: "In Sweden very few weavers are artists, and in this school we expect students to use good colors and design so they must copy what outstanding weavers have designed. When you get home, you can design on your own."²⁶ And so she did. She completed her master's degree and taught occupational therapy students required to take handweaving. Looms were in short supply, so Berglund designed and built the portable Minnesota Loom for students and hobbyists. It was a 20" four-harness, jack-type loom, which could be taken apart easily and boxed for shipping. It had a floor stand. Berglund's weaving and looms are in a special room at the American-Swedish Institute in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

The Arts and Crafts movement in Scandinavia had encouraged a looking back to preserve and appreciate the traditional craft heritage threatened by industrial mass production. But modern Scandinavian artists also were influenced by functionalist and Bauhaus ideas to develop better designs for factory production, products that would express their own age. One did not copy the past, one should learn the craft and respect the materials. Be inspired by the heritage and culture, but observe, experiment and make new works for one's own era. These ideals also were fundamental to the new Cranbrook Academy of Art founded in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, (north of Detroit) in 1932, founded by George Booth and designed by Finnish architect Eliel Saarinen. Part of an educational community with a school for boys, Kingswood school for girls and a museum, the Academy was a postgraduate studio where talented young craftsmen and women would develop their own designs while working with a master. Not until 1943 did Cranbrook offer a graduate degree.²⁷

Loja Saarinen, the architect's wife who was a painter and sculptor, established Studio Loja Saarinen to create textiles for the new buildings and for commissions. She was Finnish, but her language was Swedish. Perhaps that explains why in 1929 she brought in Maija Andersson-Wirde, an established artist at HV in Stockholm as a designer and studio assistant.²⁸ Lillian Holm and Ruth Ingvarsson from the noted modern rug workshop of Märta Måås-Fjetterström (MMF) at Båstad arrived at about the same time. The studio employed several Swedish weavers

²⁴ *The Handicrafter*, July/August 1930, 34.

²⁵ Marguerite Porter Davison, *A Handweaver's Pattern Book* (Davison, Swathmore, Pa. 1944).

²⁶ Hilma Berglund, "One Lifetime Isn't Enough for All the Things I'd Like to Do," unpublished typescript autobiography, The American-Swedish Institute Archives, Minneapolis, 33.

²⁷ *Design in America: The Cranbrook Vision 1925-1990* (NY: Harry N. Abrams, 1983).

²⁸ Christa C. Mayer Thurman "Textiles" chapter in *Design in America*, 141.

living in the Detroit area on a part-time basis until it closed in 1942. Swedish cabinetmaker John P. Bexell, husband of one of the weavers, developed a countermarche loom better suited to the studio's work in the 1930's. The Bexell loom, based on a Swedish model and later called the Cranbrook loom, is still considered a premier loom for rugs and tapestry.²⁹

Wirde created several designs in her short time in Michigan, including a carpet featuring medallions of the school buildings for the Kingswood study hall lobby (1931) and an Art Deco Animal Carpet (1932). Most of the rug weaving used the traditional Swedish rölakan (interlocked inlay) tapestry or a pile (rya or flossa) techniques. Wall hangings were done with wool inlay on a plain weave linen using shuttles, a technique used by HV and MMF with slight variations to create a stable tapestry more quickly woven than the traditional gobelin.³⁰

Holm and Ingvarsson had learned these techniques as apprentices at the MMF studio.³¹ When the depression forced Cranbrook to close its craft studios, Wirde returned to Sweden, but Holm and Ingvarsson only returned to Stockholm to complete weaving studies at HV. Both returned in 1933 to Cranbrook and to teach in the area. Holm took over Wirde's Saturday weaving class for Wayne State (Detroit) University's School of Education art program held at Cranbrook. She was also appointed the first fulltime weaving instructor at Cranbrook's Kingswood school for girls (1933-66), where she had an apartment on the top floor. She taught weaving at the Flint Institute of Art for 28 years before retiring and returning to Sweden in 1966. Her tapestries hang in the school's lobby. Her *First View of New York* (1930s) in the angular modern style used in Sweden at the time is at the Flint Institute of Art.³² Ingvarsson taught weaving, textile processes and design in the Art Department at Wayne State University in Detroit from 1936-8 and 1952-70.³³ She retired and remained in Detroit. Holm and Ingvarsson were named weavers for the Saarinen tapestry *Sermon on the Mount* (1941) for Eliel Saarinen's First Christian Church in Columbus, Indiana. It took nearly a year of fulltime work to complete the 12' x 35' tapestry with its delicate pastel colors.³⁴

Cranbrook created a cultural oasis where artist and craftsman could work together, with respect for materials and craftsmanship and good design. Working with master artists, the students developed some of America's finest modern interiors, furnishings and architecture of the 1950s. The head of the weaving department (1942-1961) was Marianne Strengell, also a Swedish speaking Finnish born artist, who had been teaching weaving at Cranbrook since 1937. Her strength was in design for industry and she emphasized experimentation and working within the limits of materials. Her students included Jack Lenor Larsen, Ed Rossbach and Robert Sailors and others who became leaders in the field.

In the years following World War II, Americans finally began to pay attention to the handsome furnishings and designs emerging from Scandinavia. Georg Jensen opened a design shop on Fifth Avenue in New York City, and Marshall Field's in Chicago featured Scandinavian modern. Scandinavian textiles had won several prizes at international shows starting in the

²⁹ Jane Patrick, "The Cranbrook Loom" *Handwoven* Sept/Oct 2002, 67.

³⁰ Ulla Cyrus, *Manual of Swedish Hand Weaving* (Braford Co., Boston, 1956), 199-201 discusses the two similar techniques.

³¹ Employment records at MMF in Båstad . Both women wove rugs and wall hangings from 1926-1928.

³² L. Saarinen papers, Cranbrook archives.

³³ Faculty Records Vertical File, Dept. of Art-Art History, Wayne State University Library, Walter P. Reuther Library.

³⁴ Thurman, *Design*, 190-193.

1920s, but in the 1950s and 1960s contemporary crafts were receiving more attention in the newspapers, interiors and craft magazines. American hobby weavers continued to go to Scandinavia to take classes. A new generation of Swedish weavers came to a USA, bringing with them the modern design ideas.

Bitten Valberg's striking *Sunset* rya rug in reds, blacks, white and grey made the cover of *Craft Horizons* in June 1957 and captured immediate attention.³⁵ This Swedish weaver is credited with being the first to design rya rugs for power loom production for the American market. She had graduated from Konstfack Art School in Stockholm, established a studio in Uppsala, where she worked for the local handicraft association. American visitors liked her work and said they had seen nothing like it in the USA. She was encouraged to come to test the market. She arrived in 1955 and got a job working for one of America's foremost designers, the Dorothy Liebes Studio in New York City, on a contract for rugs with the DuPont company. Valberg later designed her own line for DuPont, using their Acrilon fiber which took color and behaved like wool in the rugs. The rug on the magazine cover was one of the series.³⁶

Georg Jensen, Inc. invited her to exhibit her handwoven rugs, which were still being woven in Sweden. These were also a success, but she found she could not earn a living with handmade rugs. Her series of tufted pile rugs produced by Cabin Crafts won a "citation of merit" in 1959 from the American Institute of Decorators. American textile artists saw the rya rugs with their impressionistic use of colors and decided "it was where you could make the art statement."³⁷ Valberg's work was widely published in the American newspapers and magazines and sold through Georg Jensen and Marshall Field's for some time. But the market declined and some of her designs were copied and cheaply made in Japan. She returned to Sweden in 1960 and continued to weave and work as head designer at the Stockholm Hemslöjd shop. She died in 2003.

Malin Selander first made a direct impact on American weavers, with her *Weaving Patterns* book in 1956 and then with her 1960 workshop and lecture tour of 28 cities. Selander studied weaving at Nordenfelt Seminary for Handwork in Gothenburg, and in 1945 was hired to teach weaving in provincial trade schools in a rural area. She had a bike, a radio, a suitcase and lots of free time, and with it she developed her patterns for her classes and her first book. In 1955 the trade school opened its craft school in Örebro and Selander ran the weaving program. She taught weaving to students who would go on to folk school to become teachers.³⁸

Her American tour had been a great success and she was tempted to stay. She recalls that the Americans used fibers that were too thick and dull in color. She introduced the technique of color blending of strands to enrich the color pallet, tried to help her American students develop a better color sense and to use finer threads. Design your own cloth, don't rely on recipes, she advised. She returned to her teaching job in Sweden and began her series of four *Swedish Swatches* books (Yellow 1962, Blue 1969, Red 1974, Green 1978). She hired weavers to weave all her designs, but she personally cut and glued in every swatch in the 2,000 books for each color. These books are now out of print, but color photos of a selection of the swatches appear in

³⁵ Conrad Brown, "Valberg," *Craft Horizons*, May/June 1957, cover, 29-31.

³⁶ Lena Holger, *Bitten Bergh Valberg* (Stockholm: Raster Förlag, 2001) and interview with the author, May 21, 2003.

³⁷ Gerhardt Knodel, director Cranbrook Academy of Art, interview with Loretta Oliver, June 24, 1998, typescript in Michigan League of Handweavers History Project Archive, Michigan State University Museum,

³⁸ Malin Selander interview with author, May 16, 2003.

Swedish Swatches (1990).³⁹ Selander made several more trips to North America in the 1960s and 1970s, offering workshops and participating in the Handweavers Guild of America biennial convergence sessions, including 2004 in Denver.

During the 1960s and 1970s there were still references to Swedish and Scandinavian weaving in the magazines. One contemporary American weaver, Lia Cook, whose current, innovative work using a computer-aided jacquard loom and photography has added a new dimension to the art of fiber, learned to weave at HV. She spent 1967-68, where her husband was teaching at the Konstfak in Stockholm. HV director, Edna Martin, gave her special instruction for the year. "The technical background was great."

says Cook. The experience set her on a new course. Her undergraduate work was in political science, but she returned to the USA and began art courses at the University of Berkeley, where she went on for the master's degree in design under Ed Rossbach, her primary mentor. Currently she is professor of art at the California College of Arts in Oakland.⁴⁰

American weaver, Charles Talley who had studied and worked with Swedish born Astrid Gauffin Feist in her Oakland, California studio, began wondering what was going on with contemporary weavers in Scandinavia. He spent a year traveling and meeting weavers and produced *Contemporary Textile Art Scandinavia* in 1982, a review of work in all five Nordic lands, which found that the current generation raised on a tradition of excellence in craft and influenced by functionalist modern ideas of designing better objects for daily living was currently attuned to the contemporary social and political concerns in fiber works. "The strong craft tradition provides artists with a material and technical base from which to construct their own individual 'language' of expression," he concluded.⁴¹

The marketplace found new enthusiasms in the 1980s and 1990s. Three-dimensional sculptural art, fiber art, was exciting and new. But the weaving magazines still featured modern Scandinavian weaving (*Weavers Journal* 1985, *Handwoven* 1987 and 1996, *Fiberarts* 1996).⁴² Swedish books remained popular, but they competed with many more works in English and the enlarged field of fiber art. When Swedish tapestry artist Helena Hernmarck first visited architects and museum directors to seek out potential clients in the New York City area in 1967, Milton Sondag, director of the Cooper Hewitt Museum told her "he was already tired of Swedish weaving."⁴³

Hernmarck persevered and found architects and corporate clients who liked her unique photorealism style and sense of monumental space. She had studied at Konstfack in Stockholm (1959-63) when the program was directed by artist Edna Martin. You were expected to know how to weave when you entered art school, Hernmarck explained, so she took the HV course. Martin wanted students to develop their own creative spirit through music and inspiration from Swedish folk textiles but to make their own statements. It was here that Hernmarck began developing techniques to enhance the images in her tapestries. Swedish artists in the 1960s were

³⁹ Malin Selander, *Swedish Swatches* (California, Unicorn Books, 1990).

⁴⁰ Lia Cook, brief interview with the author at TSA Symposium in Toronto, October 13, 2006.

⁴¹ Charles S. Talley, *Contemporary Textile Art Scandinavia* (Sweden, Carmina, 1982), 16.

⁴² "Scandinavian Traditions," *The Weavers' Journal*, Spring 1985; "Weaving of the Nordic Countries," *Handwoven*, May/June 1987; "Nordic Traditions," *Handwoven*, September/October 1996; "New Nordic Fiber Art," *Fiberarts*, Summer 1996.

⁴³ Helena Hernmarck interview with author, August 11, 2003.

expressing their own unique vision, weaving their own tapestries instead of submitting designs to studio weavers.⁴⁴

Hernmarck was influenced by pop art that “allowed me to scale up and break the rules.” Her design for Habitat 67 in Canada caught the attention of Peter Blake, editor of *Architectural Forum*. She doesn’t mind being called a realist; images of real places, things, people and nature interest her more and communicate more to people, she believes. Her works include Sailing in Boston Harbor for a Boston bank, a rocky shore and lone rowboat for an insurance agency and a working steel mill floor for Bethlehem Steel, glorious red-orange poppies and aged newspapers and stamps. She avoids a political message, choosing her subjects for their “narrative tension, composition and color treatment.” The surfaces of her tapestries are heavily textured of artistically mixed and graded colors of mostly wool yarns from Sweden. Up close the work resembles the dots of printing or the pointillist, but at a distance the eye blends the colors and sees sharp images.

Hernmarck works outside the main direction of contemporary fiber art, she says, but that does not bother her. Her encounter with the New World has allowed her to use its vitality and “grand dimension” of life.⁴⁵ Her career is remarkable in its original approach and also in that she is celebrated and commissioned for work both in her home country and in the USA. Immigrants are more often forgotten by their former homelands. Hernmarck spends a lot of time in the design process and continues fine tuning at the loom, where she works alone or with an assistant on her 11-ft Swedish loom in her Connecticut studio. Some of her work is woven in the studio where she apprenticed in Sweden, and uses a special wool that is dyed under her supervision in Sweden. She has recently begun teaching a few workshops with the intention of passing along her special technique.

American handweaving has benefited in several ways from the Swedish expertise in the 20th century. The earliest Swedish weavers brought the traditions preserved through generations of folk culture. The second wave brought modern design ideas suited to postwar contemporary architecture. A third and ongoing influence is more reciprocal, responding to traditions and freedoms of each country and to the expanded access created by the internet.

⁴⁴ Interview and Helena Hernmarck “Commentary,” *Shuttle, Spindle and Dyepot*, Spring 2003, 26.

⁴⁵ Monica Bowman, *Helena Hernmarck, Tapestry Artist* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 25.