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THE LANDSCAPE TAPESTRIES OF LOUISE NEVELSON, 1972-1997

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Introduction

The project described here combined modern art, contemporary hand weaving and several spirited people who collaborated to create a unique body of work. Between 1972 and 1976, Louise Nevelson, the well-known American sculptor and collagist, created a series of collages expressly as models for modern tapestries. Over the next eight years, fifteen unusual tapestries (eight unique panels plus an edition of seven nearly identical panels) were woven after these collages at the Dovecot Studios in Edinburgh, Scotland, under the artistic direction of Archie Brennan and Fiona Mathison. Gloria F. Ross was the visionary and originator of this collaborative project, assuming the role known in France as a tapestry *éditeur*.

This paper is based on research conducted for the recent book, *Gloria F. Ross & Modern Tapestry*, the product of a five-year investigation, essentially resulting in an ethnography of Ross's decades-long professional career in the arts.¹ Drawing from unpublished letters, notes, sketches, photographs, and other materials now in the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, the book documents Gloria Ross's tapestry and hooked-rug projects in New York, France, Scotland, the American Southwest and elsewhere. Delving beyond the book's thesis, the objectives for this paper are (a) to provide an overview of one narrow slice of that career—the collaborative work that developed between Nevelson, Brennan and Ross, (b) to explore the origins and sources of inspiration for Nevelson's little known and underappreciated paper collages, and (c) to demonstrate the breadth and beauty of the resulting low-relief and *trompe l'oeuil* tapestries that celebrate the efforts of the Dovecot's talented weavers.

A Career in the Textile Arts

For thirty-four years, Gloria Ross worked with well-known American and European painters to create and adopt over one hundred designs that would be made into hooked rugs or hand-woven tapestries. About half of these were executed singly and half in multiple editions of three to seven, creating almost two hundred and fifty textile panels in all. After several needlepoint projects following designs by her sister, the widely accomplished painter Helen Frankenthaler, Ross began by hooking rugs in the 1960s. Again, she started by using designs from Frankenthaler, who was then married to the abstract expressionist Robert Motherwell, with whom Ross also worked.

After operating her own hooked rug studio in New York City for a short time, Ross engaged tapestry weavers, first at the Dovecot Studios in Scotland and then at Aubusson and Felletin in France. Eventually she also worked extensively with Native American weavers in the American Southwest, briefly with the Victorian Tapestry Workshop in Australia, and even with commercial broadloom weavers in China and the United States. She initiated, funded, and carried out such projects because she believed that textiles were equal to any other artistic medium. She was dedicated to bringing fine European tapestry to America and often contrasted this art form with the off-loom fiber art movement of the Sixties.

¹ All direct quotations appearing here are published in Hedlund (2010), unless otherwise noted. Titles of tapestries are italicized and set in quotation marks; titles of non-fiber artworks that served as models (*maquettes*) for tapestries are italicized.

Nevelson—Sculptor and Collage Maker

The artist Louise Nevelson was born in 1899 in Russia, but she grew up in Maine and established her artistic career in New York City. She called herself “an architect of shadows.” Indeed, she created amazing, large-scale painted wood and found object constructions. Many were entirely black; others she painted white. In both, the artist emphasized the crevices, shadows and textures of her intriguing materials. Her large sculpture *Sky Cathedral* joined the collections of the Museum of Modern Art in 1958. She showed in the Venice Biennale in 1962 and gained an international reputation during the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Nevelson cultivated a reputation for flamboyance. Her sense of fashion was unique and, although she did not create textiles herself, she certainly wore and used fabric creatively. Ross once commented, “There was something so wonderfully gothic about much of Nevelson’s work and Nevelson herself, who was an artwork unto herself. Her wonderful costumes, and those big mink eyelashes, and all the rest—the turbans!” When Nevelson died in 1988, Gloria said the memorial captured the artist’s “crazy elegance and style, humor and artistry.”

Nevelson was represented by Pace Gallery on Fifty-Seventh Street in Manhattan. Tapestries orchestrated by Ross were represented by Pace Editions, Pace’s print-dealing counterpart at the same location. Gallery directors Arnold Glimcher and Richard Solomon played major roles in bringing together Ross and Nevelson and sharing the ventures’ costs, as well as marketing the final artworks. Discussions among the four began in 1970. Two years later designs and weaving began to materialize.

The Dovecot Studios and Archie Brennan

By 1972 Ross had already been working for several years with Archie Brennan, artistic director of the Dovecot Studios in Edinburgh, Scotland, and a superb artist and weaver in his own right. He rapidly became a major mentor for her. By the time work with Nevelson was initiated, his team of expert weavers had woven expressive “GFR Tapestries” from purpose-made designs and extant paintings by Motherwell, Frankenthaler, Kenneth Noland, Jack Youngerman, Adolph Gottlieb and several others.

The Dovecot Studios were established in 1912 and also became known as the Edinburgh Tapestry Company. Founded by a Scottish nobleman and run for decades by members of his family, the studio produced grand scale tapestries for its aristocratic patrons. By the 1950s, the operation was transformed into a commercially viable artistic venture, with its weavers and apprentices working from designs by recognized artists and weaving tapestries for public sale and on commission.

Archie Brennan arrived as an apprentice at the Dovecot in 1948 and became artistic director in 1964. He employed both men and women (where only men were previously hired) and brought the first college-trained weavers to the workshop. Among the Dovecot’s skilled artisans working when Gloria Ross commissioned work there were Maureen Hodge, Fiona Mathison, Jean Taylor, Douglas Grierson, Harry Wright, Fred Mann, Neil McDonald and apprentices Johnny Wright and Gordon Brennan (Archie Brennan’s nephew).

Nevelson Collages, Dovecot Tapestries

The first model made by Louise Nevelson for a GFR Tapestry was a lead intaglio collage called *Sky Cathedral*, named after her original 1950s construction series. It consisted of multiple leaden-gray pieces with stamped designs and texture, separately affixed to a heavy paper substrate, 29 by 23½ inches. Part of a print series titled *Night Sound* (1971) and executed in multiples for Pace Gallery, this particular version was made specifically as a tapestry maquette, with penciled annotations made directly on the paper. In

meetings between Ross and Nevelson, the puzzle-like pieces were moved and adjusted to best produce a woven tapestry.

Two quite different tapestries resulted from the singular model. “*Sky Cathedral I*” used gold-colored metallic threads in a nubby weave on a deep black wool background. Although five tapestries in this edition were planned, only one was made (and this one, 84 by 68 inches, has not been located). When Nevelson saw this first tapestry, Ross reported that she exclaimed in her booming voice, “That’s not a Nevelson, that’s a Ross.” This reaction notwithstanding, Nevelson seemed eager to proceed with other tapestries. The *New York Times* described this piece in a review: “Surely the Nevelson, a dazzling gold against black hanging . . . is one of the freshest approaches in this genre” [of handwoven tapestries].²

The woven interpretation of “*Sky Cathedral II*” emerged as white-on-white patterning on a deep blue wool background. Its textured interlacements and shading reveal Brennan’s admiration for Nevelson’s white-on-white constructions. A full set of five plus two artist’s proofs were made in this edition between 1974 and 1977, each measuring 88 by 70 inches. The handling of signatures varied with each tapestry in the edition and required team meetings to clarify. It would take a separate research paper to untangle their discussions and the decision-making regarding this controversial aspect of production.

Following the two *Sky Cathedral* tapestries, Nevelson exhorted Ross to “Go beyond!” and declared she would make more maquettes but *only* if each could be a one-of-a-kind weaving. Thus began the planning for the “Uniques,” as Nevelson and others would call them. The artist had stumbled upon the inspiration for this new series a few years earlier. Her long-time assistant, Diana Mackown has reported, “I traveled with Louise in 1972 to Amarillo, Texas, where she [was] to give a kind of seminar . . . After her work there, we rented a car and drove to New Mexico to visit Georgia O’Keeffe [at her home in Abiquiu]. We also made a few trips to Arizona . . .”³

The stunning landscapes of the southwestern deserts and uplands clearly made their way into her psyche. By 1976, Nevelson had created seven brilliant little collages made from torn papers, cardboards and other found materials. Small in comparison to most of Nevelson’s monumental works, these ranged from 8½ by 6 inches to 19 by 20 inches. In earthy tones and rough textures inspired by those visits to the Southwest, most were given names that evoke arid lands—*Night Mountain, Desert, Dusk in the Desert, Mirror Desert, Reflection, Landscape (within Landscape, and The Late, Late Moon.*

To view the collages and discuss the project, Archie Brennan traveled to New York and met directly with Louise Nevelson, Gloria Ross and the gallery directors. Whereas all other tapestry projects had proceeded from photos and cartoons of original artwork, Nevelson’s original collages were taken to Edinburgh. The weavers worked from the originals in each case.

Despite the diminutive size of the maquettes, their complexity required many trials and samples. Archie Brennan, weaver Jeanne Taylor and others in the studio painstakingly developed a series of swatches. The Dovecot team explored many fibers, yarn weights and structures, and weaves to achieve the effects they wanted in interpreting the collages. These matters depended principally on the weavers’ creativity. Samples were subsequently sent to Ross who decided whether to share with Nevelson, Glimcher and Solomon. At one or another time, all weavers and staff members at the Dovecot contributed to the Nevelson series. Brennan once joked that the Dovecot had almost become the “Nevelson Tapestry Company.”

² Rita Reif, “Putting Down the Brush and Painting on a Loom,” *New York Times*, 9/29/1972.

³ Personal communication, Diane Mackown to Ann Hedlund via e-mail, 9/2/2010.

The first Unique executed was “*Night Mountain*.” Before the final tapestry was made in one solid piece, separate pieces were woven to scale and sent to New York to show the artist some possibilities. She moved them around to her satisfaction. The finished tapestry, woven as a single piece almost 7 by 5 feet, was considerably larger than the 11 by 8½-inch maquette. As described in *Gloria F. Ross & Modern Tapestry*, “Corrugations grew into weaverly ripples and channels; a crumpled piece of silver foil became shiny silver-toned threads; feathered, tattered edges smoothed into more subtle margins.” Brennan proudly called the finished work “quite delicious.” He noted, “We are all thrilled at the result—really worth all the tests + re-tests.”

For “*Dusk in the Desert*,” the weavers ultimately “created intentionally distorted slits, tightened or loosened yarn tension, varied interlacing over one or multiple warps, and employed on-loom wrapping stitches. They also employed . . . color blending, hatching, pick-and-pick alternation of colors, and modulated shading.” A third maquette included creased and worn sandpaper and became “*Desert*,” now owned by the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. “*Mirror Desert*” contains a finely woven Coptic-like motif and a glittery diaper pattern, but photos of the maquette have not been found, so the original sources for these are obscure.

The maquette for “*Reflection*” was “stained and creased cardboard, including a disassembled flattened box,” with a spray-painted corner. The tapestry was woven in several pieces and assembled. In the hands of Dovecot’s weavers, “cardboard with its surface torn away becomes a subtle weave of white on white. . . the warp-weft direction of the weaving is countered in adjacent patches. The weave is very uniform and fine; the only actual textural changes appear at the margins of the adjoined pieces.”

The last two Nevelson collages were unwoven at the Dovecot when Brennan left in 1978. The studio proceeded with those under the able direction of Fiona Mathison. For *Landscape (within a Landscape)*, “On a blackened and weathered wooden backing, Nevelson [had] affixed a jumble of torn, abraded, stained, and overpainted cardboards.” The finished tapestry became a patchwork of layered pieces, with warps running in both directions. *The Late, Late Moon* was the final Nevelson collage to be woven. The artist incorporated a wooden piece into the mode, but the weavers declined her request to use actual wood in their work. Ross and the gallery agreed to the veto.

Concluding Remarks

Ross’s complex tapestry-making projects never proceeded in the same manner twice—each developed a different dynamic between her, the selected artist and the chosen weavers. Some artists like Nevelson were thoroughly engaged; others more distant. Some weavers like Archie Brennan took the upper hand; others were controlled more directly by Ross. Sometimes the relationships wore thin, but others resulted in lasting friendships.

For the Nevelson-Dovecot projects, three strong and colorful characters came together and their chemistry happened to work. Louise Nevelson had quirky clout and, if you will, artistic license. Gloria Ross gave Archie Brennan the lead, he was her mentor and she more than trusted his judgment, she relied upon him. In addition, Pace Gallery served as a critical intermediary between Nevelson and Ross, and the gallery also provided crucial financial backing. Somehow the roles each played balanced out during the production phases.

Decision-making during production is one thing. Post-production marketing is yet another. After the tapestries were completed and for the rest of Ross’s life and career, the artists have consistently received more credit than anyone else. Their names were well-recognized and held fiscal importance for galleries, collectors and publishers. Ross often had to fight for her own name to be retained in gallery records and on museum labels; tapestry éditeur is not, after all, a household term. The weavers fared even worse—in gallery shows, articles and reviews, their individual names are ignored time and again.

Current research has served to clarify Ross's activities and to emphasize the weavers' central roles in determining the ultimate character of the GFR Tapestries. As I state in *Gloria F. Ross & Modern Tapestry*, "For every hour that Ross spent planning, traveling, meeting and promoting the Gloria F. Ross Tapestries & Carpets, there were weavers, needle workers, dyers and other specialists behind the scenes. The ultimate accomplishments, in my opinion, are the direct results of these people's hard work. The skilled hands, sharp minds, deep experience and dedication of the weavers do shine through."

Bibliography

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