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Mildred T. Johnstone's Needlepoint Tapestries of Bethlehem Steel:
A Less Travelled Road

By
Ruta T. Saliklis



Fig. 1. Mildred T. Johnstone. *Alice in a Wonderland of Steel*, 1949, Collection of the Allentown Art Museum.

The steel mills in Bethlehem are quiet now, but Mildred T. Johnstone's boldly colored needlepoint tapestries vividly remind us of their awesome power in the 1940s and 1950s. Far from being realistic, literal renderings, these abstract and highly textural interpretations use steel making as a metaphor for modern life. The machinery is larger than life, crackling and spewing out the molten steel used to construct oilrigs and skyscrapers. The people in the mill are very small—the anonymous steelworkers in masks, the artist as a bewildered *Alice in a Wonderland of Steel*. Mildred Johnstone's needlepoints are personal and spiritual. Her Buddha rising above the blast furnace signals that no matter how deafening the machinery, spiritual beliefs can prevail, bestowing a semblance of calm in a fast-paced, dehumanized world.

Mildred Johnstone received her artistic training from a variety of sources. In the early 1940s, she studied painting at the Barnes Foundation near Philadelphia. Although she liked painting, she soon realized that her busy lifestyle did not lend itself to oil painting. Johnstone's second husband, William H. Johnstone, was vice president in charge of financial and legal matters at Bethlehem Steel. Consequently, the Johnstones spent a great deal of time traveling within the United States and abroad on Bethlehem Steel business. In the 1930s and early 1940s, Milly (as she was known) created small decorative embroideries—monogrammed towels, ecclesiastical embroideries, and a wall hanging based on a Pennsylvania-German design. These needlework projects, a hesitant first step in finding her artistic medium, kept her fingers busy during her travels, but they did not satisfy her aesthetic curiosity.

The turning point in Johnstone's artistic career came in 1948 when, on the invitation of her husband, she became the first woman to tour the Bethlehem Steel works. Awed by the power and grandeur of the place, she envisioned herself as Alice in Wonderland, growing smaller and smaller. When asked which elements of steel making she most responded to she stated: "That is difficult to say. What you call the elements are something to be felt, not itemized. Perhaps one will be a giant hook silhouetted against the sky; another a hot metal car. Or I may stop and photograph the web like tracery of a catwalk atop a blast furnace."¹ These visits provided Johnstone with the inspiration and material she needed for her needlepoint series on the theme of steel making.

Throughout her lifetime, Johnstone successfully teamed up with collaborators who helped her render her fantastic visions into needlepoint masterpieces. In 1948 and 1949, while taking art classes at Muhlenberg College, Johnstone brought sculptor George Rickey (1907-2002) to the steel plant to discuss her ideas for the tapestries. Johnstone's first formal artistic collaboration occurred with Chilean painter and muralist Pablo A. Burchard (1919-1991), who exhibited his work in Chile and Washington D.C. starting in 1942 and studied at Abraham Rattner's workshop at the New School for Social Research.

Although the Allentown Art Museum has an extensive archive of letters and sketches from Johnstone, little remains from her collaboration with Burchard. According to Carmen Orrego-Salas, a close friend of Johnstone and Burchard, Johnstone met Burchard in Chile in 1949.² An undated newspaper clipping indicates that in 1949 Johnstone began acquiring photographs of steel plants from which she made collages. While aboard ship en route to Chile, she continued working on the collages, and when she arrived there, she met Pablo Burchard, who drew cartoons from the collages for her embroideries.

Surviving records indicate Johnstone and Burchard collaborated on four needlepoints in 1949: *Little Town of Bethlehem*, *Alice in a Wonderland of Steel*, *Little Man*, *What Now?* and *Industrial Doll House*. Burchard's gouache painting titled *Araucanian Toys* from 1949 is in the permanent collection of the Art Museum of the Americas in Washington D.C. A definite similarity in style is evident when the gouache is viewed in relation to the needlepoints Milly stitched that same year. In 1957, Johnstone exhibited her work in Santiago, Chile, Burchard's birthplace.

The idea for *Little Town of Bethlehem* arose from watching William Johnstone test the lights on the Steel Company Christmas trees in front of the office building. In Milly's words: "It was as though some magician had taken millions of sparks from the open hearth and sprinkled them over the branches – a warm and glowing moment – closeness of peace..." At that moment, Johnstone decided to create a needlepoint of "Christmas trees with furnaces silhouetted against the sky..."³

¹ Mildred T. Johnstone quoted in Merrick Jackson, "The Point of the Needle," *Steelways* (December 1957).

² Carmen Orrego-Salas, telephone conversation with author, 12 July 2001.

³ Mildred T. Johnstone, *An Effort to Try to Trace the Thread that Might Answer the Constant Question* (paper presented to the Bethlehem Women's Club), Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, 1956.

The needlepoint featuring Milly as *Alice in a Wonderland of Steel* was her response to “seeing the plant loaded with texture—bricks, soot, rust and vapor and linear movements of catwalks, spiral stairs and wire rope—the whole tangle of the mill is puzzlement made concrete.” Johnstone exhibited *Alice in a Wonderland of Steel* in the Designer-Craftsmen USA exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in 1950, where it was awarded first prize by the American Craftsmen’s Educational Council.

Little Man, What Now?, the third needlepoint of the Steel Series, depicts her husband as a diminutive lost soul. The inspiration for this also came to her on a tour of the Steel Mill:

Once when I was walking away from a blast furnace ‘shed,’ I looked back and saw one man silhouetted against the white vapor. In front of me was the giant office building—all the offices on each floor were lighted except one—my husband’s office! Two black spots—the little man and his place of work. Suddenly, I felt his loneliness, so I put it into a needlepoint...⁴

Industrial Doll House, the fourth Steel Series needlepoint, allowed Johnstone to apply “feminine logic” (in her words) to the steel industry. The scene is clean, orderly and colorful. The design simultaneously shows the inside activity of the steel mill and its exterior towers and skyline in the manner of a cutaway dollhouse.

Johnstone was in the process of completing a fifth tapestry based on a Burchard design, *Buddha in the Blast Furnace*, when she came to Joseph Cantieni’s art class at Muhlenberg College, to seek advice on how to correct a problem she was having with the Buddha’s face. Cantieni simplified the design and Johnstone was able to achieve a serene Buddha.

Thus began a fruitful collaboration with Joseph Cantieni and a close relationship with his wife Margaret, a noted artist in her own right. Margaret and Milly often stitched together in the Cantieni home, where Milly could enjoy the company of the Cantieni children. Not only did Joe collaborate with Milly, Margaret Cantieni also contributed ideas about design and color for the tapestries.

In 1951, the art department at Muhlenberg College closed, and Cantieni was suddenly unemployed. At Milly’s request, Bill Johnstone secured him employment as artist-in-residence at the Bethlehem Steel Corporation, a position he held until his retirement. Cantieni was the chief designer and interior decorator for the Bethlehem Steel offices in Bethlehem and Washington, D.C. He designed furnishing fabrics, rugs, small sculptures, and dinnerware ornamented with his own interpretation of medieval alchemists’ symbols for the ingredients in steel. In addition, he made paintings of golfers at the Saucon Valley Country Club (the club for Bethlehem Steel executives) all the while continuing to design tapestries with Milly Johnstone.

⁴ Mildred T. Johnstone, *An Effort to Try to Trace the Thread that Might Answer the Constant Question* (paper presented to the Bethlehem Women’s Club), Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, 1956.

In the preparatory stages of a new collaborative project, Johnstone researched her subjects extensively, and provided Cantieni with books and photographic collages as starting points for the designs. Cantieni compared the collaborative process with Johnstone to the making of an opera. Cantieni “wrote” the opera based on Milly’s libretto. Milly “performed” the piece in brightly colored wool, angora and metallic threads.

One of their first projects was a tapestry titled *Electric Arc Furnace*, completed in 1952. Using a Bethlehem Steel photograph of an electric arc furnace, which looked to Johnstone like a ship tipped over by a storm, Cantieni first sketched the furnace on paper for Milly to approve, and then made a diazotype or blueprint in reverse (blue lines on a white background). Milly worked with colored pencil on tracing paper placed over the diazotype to determine her colors. Once she was satisfied with the colors, she matched yarns to the colors in the sketch. Johnstone felt that certain colors and textures of yarn matched the sensations of steel making:

There is such a variety of yarns that just fit a steel mill. Fluorescent flash nylon for the spitting violence of an electric arc furnace and the burning crackle of scrap iron. Scotch heather for refractory brick. Metallic threads for French knots—nuts and bolts and riveting!⁵

In 1952, Johnstone completed *Pink Nude in a Black Ingot*, her most personal reaction to the steel industry up to that time. The inspiration for this tapestry came to her after a tour of Bethlehem Steel’s Strip Mill:

One day I was in the Strip Mill, close to a procession of flat cars, each with its glowing ‘ingot.’ They wound in and about me with the ritual movement of priestesses offering themselves up to the white heat... When I asked why they lowered the ingots into the soaking pit, the foreman said ‘to give them an even heat and make them more pliable for reshaping in the rolling mill.’⁶

Milly found this to be symbolic of her life. She was being shaped by her husband’s role in the steel industry, and she could either accept it or she could fear and reject it. By depicting herself as a nude, Milly showed that despite her vulnerability, she was ready to be rolled and shaped by life’s events. Another tapestry on the same theme is *Bride in a Blast Furnace*. According to Johnstone, it is “symbolic of burning off the dross of negative resistance.”

French surrealist writer Anais Nin was so moved by Johnstone’s *Pink Nude in a Black Ingot* that she noted it in a diary entry made in the summer of 1956:

I went to see the tapestries and they were rich in color. They had the beauty of primitive paintings, a primitive looking for the first time at the machines and men

⁵ Mildred T. Johnstone quoted in “Adventures in Needlepoint,” *Everywoman’s Baby* (October 1957): 48.

⁶ Mildred T. Johnstone, Design for a Talk on Needlepoints (paper presented at the first International Needlepoint Festival at the Birmingham Museum of Art), Birmingham, Alabama, 1972.

at work. It was an extraordinary transposition turning into decorative abstract motifs all the various aspects of steel making.

I was touched, too, by the human motivation. As an artist, who had always been among artists, Millie entered a strange and foreign world. Instead of rejecting it, as I might have, she espoused it by translating it into terms she could love and take pleasure in. She exposed its potential inspiration as design.

I thought it was a metaphor, an indication of how the modern world, rather than destroy the artist, could be used by him to his own ends. That is what Millie did.⁷

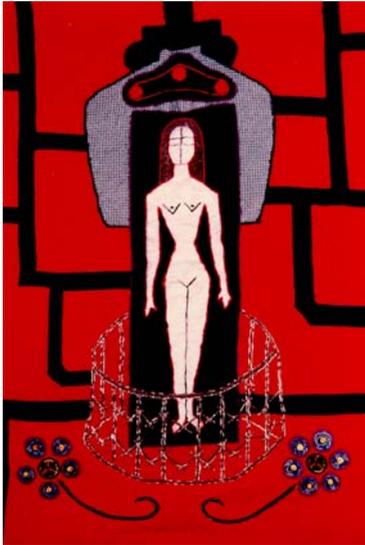


Fig. 2. Mildred T. Johnstone, Pink Nude in a Black Ingot, 1952, Collection of Margaret Buchholz.

Johnstone's most cherished acquaintances were artists, writers, dancers and choreographers, including Martha Graham and Jerome Robbins. In the 1950s, Johnstone introduced Anais Nin to fiber artist Lenore Tawney, another longtime friend. Through Tawney, Johnstone met ceramic artist Toshiko Takaezu. Johnstone maintained a close relationship with furniture designer George Nakashima and his family. Nakashima's daughter Mira considered Mrs. Johnstone her godmother. The exhibition at the Allentown Art Museum features a needlepoint based on Mira Nakashima's childhood drawing. Milly's artistic acquaintances became an extended family to her. She felt more comfortable interacting with them than she did socializing with Bethlehem Steel executives and their wives.

Milly Johnstone knew that her association with Bethlehem Steel opened windows of opportunity for her. Cantieni stated that Milly had the ability to see whomever she pleased. While Bill Johnstone was busy conducting business in Paris, Milly visited museums and artists' studios. In the late 1940s, when the Johnstones found themselves in

⁷ Anais Nin, *The Diary of Anais Nin*, Gunther Stuhlmann, ed., Volume Six, 1955-1966 (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1976): 54.

southern France, Milly managed to meet Picasso on a path near his home. Picasso invited Milly to tea, and afterwards, asked her to model Madame Matisse's exquisitely embroidered gowns. On another trip, Johnstone met with Marc Chagall in his Paris apartment.

George Holton, Milly's firstborn son from her first marriage, put her in contact with the German fashion photographer Willy Maywald, who is best known for his photograph of Christian Dior's Bar Suit in 1947. Around 1952, Milly accompanied Maywald on a photo shoot at Picasso's studio, where she was photographed with Picasso and French painter Françoise Gilot. Maywald also photographed the Johnstones in Morocco in December 1955, at which time Milly took a work in progress to the camel market in Marrakech, immediately attracting a crowd of curious bystanders. An Arab man was interested in acquiring her lovely "prayer rug." Through an interpreter, Johnstone stated that the piece was not yet finished. The man responded: "With Allah nothing is ever finished. Allah knows!"⁸

Maywald photographed Milly contemplating the eleventh century *Bayeaux Tapestry* at the Musée de la Reine Mathilde in France. Milly felt a deep connection with Queen Mathilde, who along with her ladies-in-waiting, embroidered the exploits of Queen Mathilde's husband, William the Conqueror, during the Norman Conquest of England. In the photograph Johnstone holds the tapestry titled *Neere and Far*. The title for this piece came from the 1640 poem by John Taylor, *In Praise of the Needle*:

Flowers, Plants, and Fishes, Beasts, Birds, Flyes and Bees.
Hills, Dales, Plaines, Pastures, Skies, Seas, Rivers, Trees:
There's nothing neere at hand, or farthest sought,
But with a needle may be shaped and wrought.

Milly rewrote this poem to reflect her experiences with the steel industry:

Smokestacks, flames and ingots, coke ovens, ladles and cranes.
Hot metal cars, slag, sparks, tracks and chains:
There is nothing near at hand or farthest sought.
But with a needle may be shaped and wrought.

Milly's version of the poem is inscribed on the tapestry. The imagery makes reference to English spot samplers, except that the typical flowers and insects have been replaced by flames, ladles and cranes in the colors observed in a steel mill.

In 1957, Johnstone worked on her largest tapestry, *Landscape of Steel*. In her correspondence with Joseph and Margaret Cantieni, she states that she wanted to make a needlepoint on the scale of the *Bayeaux Tapestry*, which measures over seventy meters long and fifty centimeters high. She never finished this depiction of her life over "highways and byways" (Milly's alternative title to this piece). This piece was so important to her and the design so complicated that she continued to work on it

⁸ Mildred T. Johnstone. 1973. Letter to Margaret Thomas Buchholz, exact date unknown.

intermittently for the rest of her life. In a letter written to Joseph Cantieni during the preparatory stages of the design she explains:

I don't know why—but, the *Landscape of Steel* keeps becoming more important—and the hand-of-God implication. Perhaps that Hand is weaving a more logical design, because the threads of Reality are having clearer colors. A landscape is a view—something time looks on and into... We decided on a long shake—the long view. Perhaps the need to take the long view of things—of our life and ourselves in it—was the beginning—the urge!⁹

Pain and anxiety are evident in Johnstone's choice of images and the words surrounding them. Black angus cattle graze by the word "anxiety." In tape-recorded interviews Cantieni explained that black angus cattle were kept on the grounds of the country club to provide fresh steaks for Bethlehem Steel executives. In her tapestry, Johnstone registers her concern for the cattle. A gray wolf stands by the word "crisis," a reference to the tragedy that occurred in 1927, when a wolf killed her infant son. In contrast, other images celebrate the accomplishments of the steel industry, including the San Francisco Bridge, the Empire State Building, oil wells and refineries, all made with Bethlehem Steel.

In 1960, Johnstone completed *The Peaceable Kingdom*, in which she makes a more direct reference to her son's death. In this tapestry, Bethlehem Steel executives are shown seated at a table, just as the apostles were at the Last Supper. Milly alludes to growing problems in the steel industry at this time:

I'm working on the *Peaceable Kingdom*, in more ways than one!!!...sewing the men behind the table...each one brings a new laugh! (I've ripped the chairman of the board out three times and he still keeps a frightened look)...of course they all have plenty to be frightened about, age and health and international complications...¹⁰

In the industry, the day-to-day lives of the executives were far removed from the noise, soot and smell of steel making. According to Milly, the men at the table were "alone with the risks of decision." In the background, Milly stitched skyscrapers and oilrigs in her unique interpretation of paradise. The foreground contains a peaceable kingdom à la Edward Hicks. The small child leading the wolf and the lamb is her second son Tommy. The following verse from Isaiah is inscribed near the bottom:

The wolf also shall lie down with the lamb and the leopard shall lie down with the kid
And the calf and the young lion – together and a little child shall lead them. (*Isaiah 11:6*)

Johnstone's firstborn son, George Holton, became a well-accomplished travel photographer. Milly used some of his photographs as source material for her later needlepoint tapestries. Johnstone's *Family Mandala* was based on Holton's photograph

⁹ Mildred T. Johnstone. Letter to Joseph Cantieni, exact date unknown.

¹⁰ Mildred T. Johnstone. 1961. Letter to Robert Barbee, exact date unknown.

of a white stucco church in Mykonos, Greece. At this time, Johnstone's interest in eastern philosophy, namely Zen Buddhism and the Japanese tea ceremony, was growing, and she had no qualms about combining Christian and Buddhist iconography in a single work. In 1963, Johnstone took a tour of Japan led by Alan Watts, the man responsible for bring the Japanese tea ceremony to the United States. In Japan, Johnstone met Hisashi Yamada, a Japanese tea master, who first came to the United States in 1964 to be the narrator of the tea ceremony at the World's Fair in New York. Johnstone narrated the tea ceremony with Yamada, and the two became close friends. In the late 1960s, Yamada opened and ran the New York branch of Urasenke Incorporated, the Japanese tea ceremony school.

On March 2, 1975, Milly Johnstone was featured in *The New York Times* "Fashions of the Times." In one of the photographs, Johnstone and Yamada perform the tea ceremony in the Johnstones' twenty-second floor apartment in New York City. In another, Milly is shown with her *Tea Mandala*, a work in progress. Yamada inherited this mandala, which he considers her masterpiece. Once inspired by life in the steel mill, Johnstone now conceived her ideas through quiet introspection and meditation. Regarding the *Tea Mandala*, she said: "I have a very special needlepoint in my head, a mandala. Circles within circles, like the wheels of life, round and round, for I feel a roundness to my life, a wheel-like rhythm, and I want to stitch it all."¹¹ During this new stage of Johnstone's life, Joseph and Margaret Cantieni continued to transform Johnstone's ideas into visual form.

In 1979, George Holton died in his sleep while leading a Lindblat travel tour in China. Milly dealt with this tragedy by making another family mandala, one with family members radiating outward from a circle in the form of a camera lens. Milly covers her eyes, because she cannot deal with the pain. George holds a camera. The wolf and the lamb oppose one another.

Milly stitched one last tapestry based on a photograph George Holton had taken of the Twin Towers at the World Trade Center, an especially haunting image in light of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. The shadow of a bird flying downward is cast on one of the towers and the silhouette of St. Nicolas Greek Orthodox Church appears at the bottom. The Johnstones were particularly interested in the Twin Towers because they were built with Bethlehem Steel, and they could be seen from their twenty-second floor apartment in United Nations Plaza. Milly enlisted the help of Joe and Margaret Cantieni with the design, and she insisted that the background be in the spectrum of hot colors observed in steel making. To the viewer observing this tapestry today, the bird looks like an airplane and the towers appear to be on fire.

In the 1970s, Johnstone's fascination with Zen Buddhism and Japanese tea rituals inspired her to stitch a series of calligraphic needlepoints in Japanese characters. For these, she collaborated with Reverend Eido Shimano Roshi, now abbot of the Zen Studies Society in New York. Roshi met Bill and Milly Johnstone in the early 1970s. He describes his impressions of the Johnstones:

¹¹ Mildred T. Johnstone. 1973 or 1974. Letter to Margaret Thomas Buchholz, exact date unknown.

Milly was always so youthful, while Bill was so grounded and broad-minded... When I was struggling as a young monk to establish a Buddhist monastery in New York State, I consulted him. Milly made tea for us. After hearing my long explanation, Bill said, “If you want to have a comfortable life, forget it. But if you want to have a meaningful life, do it. I will help you”.¹²

After retiring from Bethlehem Steel, Bill Johnstone put all of his energy into the construction of the Dai Bosatsu Zendo Kongo-ji, a mountain monastery in Livingston Manor, New York, which opened on July 4, 1976.

Roshi remained a spiritual advisor to the Johnstones for the remainder of their lives. Bill and Milly spent a great deal of time meditating at the Zendo. Although Milly was stitching less at this stage of her life, she completed about a dozen calligraphic needlepoints in Japanese characters which Roshi had drawn for her on the canvas. She created needlepoints of the Zen names given to her and her husband by Roshi. Bill’s dharma name, which translates to “spiritual stone,” was stitched in black on an orange and grey background. Milly’s dharma name, “reflective mirror,” was done in green on a blue background. In art as in life, Bill and Milly complemented one another. A needlepoint titled *Namu Cha*, which means “devotion to tea,” also sums up an important aspect of Milly’s life. The title for a third needlepoint, *Dokuza Dai U Ho*, is taken from a famous Zen phrase—I sit alone on this sublime peak.

If Milly were to sit alone on a sublime peak, she would be stitching a needlepoint. For most of her life though, Milly was not alone. She surrounded herself with friends who nourished her creative spirit. Joe and Margaret Cantieni collaborated with her until her death in 1988. The exhibition at the Allentown Art Museum is the first to acknowledge the tremendous role the Cantienis played in the creation of these tapestries. It seems fitting to end with Milly’s personal reflection on their relationship:

Dear Joe,

I’ve been viewing “Steel” for a long time—from the outside in—and from the inside out. In the process are you and Margaret—doing what Paul Klee says art does—“make visible.” Through your wordless understanding—through what you are, plus your own rare talent you are making visible a long sequence of concealed events.

Remember what Emerson says on that—“The secret of the whole world is the tie between person and event. The same contains the event that shall befall it”—Besides Bill—besides the event of you and Margaret and the boys—there was the event of little Tommy and the wolf—that tie—unraveling like a tangled thread.

... The Invisible made real at the time of the “accident” overshadowed the ugly and specific facts. Through you, that Invisible is being made visible—the whole process of needlepoints.

¹² Eido T. Shimano. 2001. Letter to author, 28 July.

In that process, the wolf within has been tamed—a treaty made! A treaty not with a certain wolf—but with some wolf-like characteristics related to Big Business, to authority—officialdom, compartments and departments.

Gradually, through and by the process of sewing—working to unite and blend, I was allowed to discover the hostility attached to the Steel Business—to Industry and an executive drive, that that hostility was in me—in my fear of aggression, which made me aggressive!

Through your aesthetic vision, your perception and sensibility, I've been able to look at this personal landscape of steel detachedly, and fall into its mysterious myth.

...Good night and thank you—

Love, Milly

Postscript

The Allentown Art Museum is the proud repository of ten needlepoint tapestries from the Steel Series. Eight of them were presented to the Museum by the Johnstones in 1976 and exhibited at the Museum in 1978. Two others were given by Margaret Cantieni in 2001. In 1992, Joseph Cantieni donated nineteen of his drawings for the tapestries. Margaret Cantieni donated a furnishing fabric titled *Shipyards*, designed by Joe for Bethlehem Steel. Milly's family and friends have been tremendously helpful with this project. I would like to especially acknowledge the Lenore G. Tawney Foundation and Margaret Buchholz for providing funding for this project.

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