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Lillian Elliott

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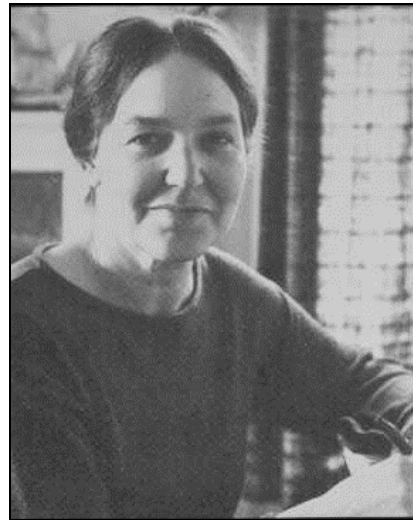
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Lillian Elliott

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What can I say in twenty minutes about Lillian Elliott that matters? Lillian asked that question, “What can I say that matters?” about each piece she began in the studio, always feeling the urgency of time. She read obituaries in the *New York Times*, admiring how obit writers could capture the essence of a life with spare words in little space.

I met Lillian in 1972 when I moved to the Bay Area. I studied with her; she became a mentor, friend and colleague. For eleven years we collaborated, making art together in a shared Berkeley studio, until I moved to Hawaii in 1990. In 1993, a year before Lillian’s death, Joanne Segal Brandford interviewed Lillian in that Berkeley studio. The two-hour session was videotaped by Paul Brandford. In preparing for this presentation, I’ve drawn especially on this raw, unedited tape, Lillian, in her own voice, talking about her art work. I’ve also drawn on an oral history entitled *Artist, Instructor and Innovator in Fiber Arts* based on four interviews with her, which the Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley published in 1992.



*Figure 1 (left). Lillian loved seeing her name in lights.
Figure 2 (right). Lillian Elliott.*

Figures 1 and 2. Lillian loved seeing her name in lights. Her charismatic presence and deep laugh preceded her as she walked into a room. At the age of 3, when she drew a cat in her father’s Detroit grocery store, she knew she was an artist. Drawing with advanced art students at the Detroit Institute of Art, eventually attending Cass Technical High School and Wayne State University, she acquired skills in several media. While at Wayne State, she studied weaving one summer at Cranbrook. It was such a disaster that she didn’t weave again for ten years! Enrolled at Cranbrook, she majored in ceramics with a minor in painting, getting her MFA in 1955.

From 1955 to '58, she was the token woman designer in the styling division at Ford Motor Co. When she moved to the Bay Area in 1960 and had trouble finding a job, she focused on making art—embroidery, using thread as a drawing line and appliqué, moving color around.



Figure 3 (left). "Needlepoint Tapestry."

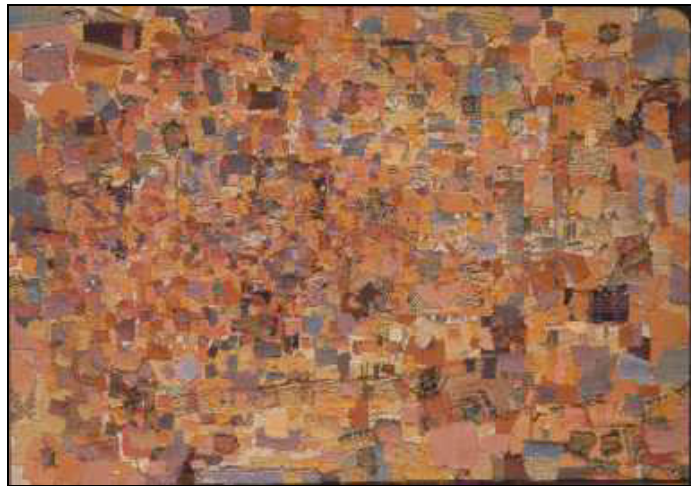


Figure 4 (right). "Walk with Cezanne."

Figures 3 and 4. "Needlepoint Tapestry" and "Walk with Cezanne." Lillian's familiarity and love of drawing and painting were always part of her. She worked with color as a painter, playing with cloth bits. She began exhibiting and, receiving recognition, she was asked to teach.

From 1966-71 Elliott taught part time as a lecturer at the University of California Berkeley in the Design Department. But she was surprised and terrified when asked to teach weaving. She got in touch with Janice (Bornt) Langdon whom she had met at Cranbrook and had Janice re-teach her how to warp a loom. She took a short Berkeley Adult education class from Kay Sekimachi. Lillian knew she could teach people like herself, but she wanted to know how to teach people who were not like her.

Teaching with Ed Rossbach at Berkeley was the highlight of Lillian's teaching career. Rossbach conveyed his belief that his students could do remarkable work. He said he wanted his students to leave with confidence. Somehow, he conveyed that. The mood was one of charged excitement in exploration. Lillian thrived as a colleague of his because it all mattered.

She kept making work, as much as she could, with two small children and several part time jobs. If Lillian wasn't teaching that semester at Cal, she might be at CCAC or Berkeley Adult School or the Richmond Art Center, racing from one place to another. So much was going on and NOT under one institutional roof.

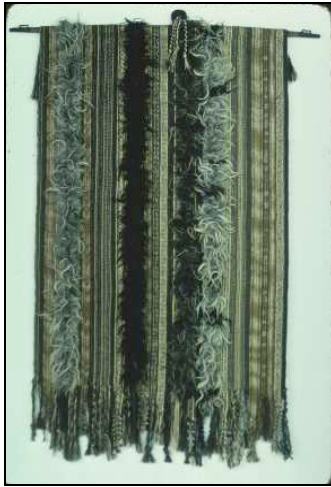


Figure 5 (left). "Tribal Cloth."

Figure 6 (right). "Tribal Cloth" detail, card woven bands with fleece.

Figures 5 and 6. Among the range of work Lillian did, there were card woven bands with fleece (this piece was stolen out of an exhibit—if you ever see it, let the world know where it is).



Figure 7 (left). Silkscreened linen.

Figure 8 (right). Overspun "collapse."

Figures 7 and 8. She worked in surface design, silk screening on cloth. And did a major body of work, exploring the effects of over twisted commercially spun yarn, both S and Z spun, in different combinations and spacing, creating what she (and others) called "collapse."



Figure 9 (left). Goat hair woven and printed.

Figure 10 (right). Pickup weave structure with printed circles.

Figures 9 and 10. Here Lillian has woven goat hair and printed on it; she liked the dialogue, back and forth, having the surface become part of the weaving. In this piece she wove triangles using pickup then printed circles on the woven surface.

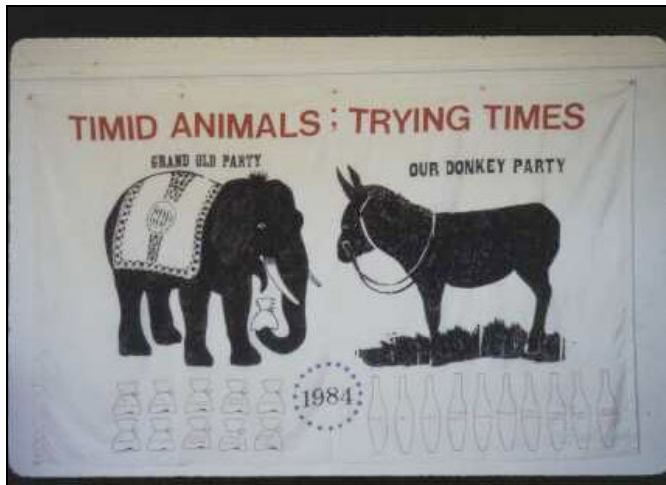


Figure 11 (left). "Campaign Banner," silk.

Figure 12 (right). "Campaign Promises," silk and torn sheets.

Figures 11 and 12. "Campaign Promises" and "Party Games." In 1984, she entered this banner and was rejected from a competition sponsored by a silk manufacturer who wanted the beauty of the fabric to carry the message. She responded in her own way, based on historical textile sources. She felt keenly, painfully the campaign promises that year while listening to the radio in her studio and got madder and madder as she tore up sheets to go with the beautiful silk warp she'd put on the loom. This work, years later, does not feel dated.



Figure 13 (left). *Ikat.*
Figure 14 (right). *"Changing Colors."*

Figures 13 and 14. Lillian's *ikat* was mostly random. She liked it that way. And in her tapestry (she never abandoned the loom), she conveyed her painterly eye and subtle skills, with homage to Mark Rothko's color field paintings in *"Changing Colors,"* 1984.

Ira has talked of the influence of traditional, historic, ethnographic textiles, teaching with them in the UCDD. Whenever Lillian taught, she arrived for class carrying bags bulging with textiles from her own collection. One by one, she'd bring them out—a raw silk shirt from Turkey, a sock from Yugoslavia, a Coptic tapestry fragment from Egypt, a plaited palm-frond puppet from Indonesia, a North African tie-dyed cloth—to illustrate a technique, a crazy, unexpected juxtaposition of color, a thread gone wild. Lillian looked at these as surprises, giving permission to her and us to play and break the rules. The level of excitement and enthusiasm with all the suggested possibilities was like a small town revival meeting—over cloth. Finally, a heap of textiles would cover the table, a wealth of carefully chosen offerings, gifts to be entered into by those who were open to this experience. Some people fled from this frenzy, totally overwhelmed by it all.



Figure 15 (left). *"Net Mural,"* raffia.
Figure 16 (right). *"Net Mural"* in progress, against a Central Asian *ikat*.

Figures 15 and 16. Here is “Net Mural,” one view showing it in progress, seen against a Central Asian *ikat* or a good printed fake—that sort of thing delighted her--hanging on her wall, her net changing color related to the shapes behind it. Later a Guatemalan *ikat-jaspe* was put on that wall before the net was finished, so part of this big net began to pick up a tighter, more squished sense of color change suggested by the Guatemalan cloth. It’s like detective work discovering how and what she borrowed. Was this appropriation with respect? Inspiration? Lillian was not trying to imitate or duplicate. What she created would not be recognizable to the weavers who made the background cloths. But she drew on their design, their vision, letting it speak to her own artist’s sensibility.



*Figure 17 (left). “Psalm 126,” printing and applique and embroidery.
Figure 18 (right). “Psalm 126,” detail; cotton and synthetics.*

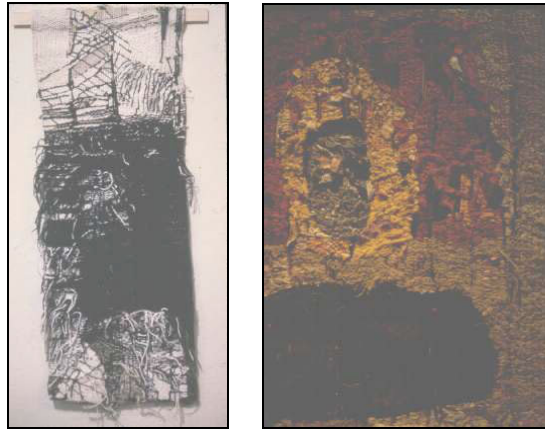
Figures 17 and 18. “Psalm 126,” printed and appliquéd. Lillian made Jewish ceremonial textiles for her family, for Passover, her favorite holiday. Each year for the Seder, she would try to make a new hanging, and would bring out past ceremonial textiles. The dining room became so festive, dancing with Hebrew letters, beloved text.



*Figure 19 (left). “Song of Songs,” tapestry.
Figure 20 (right). Passover hanging detail; handwoven linen and appliqué.*

Figures 19 and 20. “Song of Songs,” woven; another in this series of bold, black linen letters against her handwoven linen cloth. Lillian wanted her work to read from a

distance, as a poster or billboard, thus her constant interest in graphic design and strongly contrasting darks and lights.



*Figure 21 (left). "Suicide Notes," tapestry.
Figure 22 (right). "Family Portrait" detail, rag tapestry.*

Figures 21 and 22. "Suicide Notes" and "Family Portrait" (detail). When Lillian's children were small, she wove many miniature tapestries, like sketches, one a week, knowing that she didn't have uninterrupted time to do more ambitious work just then. Her rag tapestries gave the rich texture of oil paint. She could certainly weave flat tapestry but the Aubusson method was not for her. She bristled at the thought of one "correct" way of doing anything. She left weft yarn ends hanging out, wanting the energy of those ends to be part of what engaged a viewer. Margery Anneberg's Gallery on Bay and Hyde Streets in San Francisco had one person exhibits of Lillian's miniature tapestries and her nets, a wonderful space which allowed her to show her latest work during those critical years.



Figure 23. "Valparaiso," wool and linen tapestry.



Figure 24. "Woven Tapestry Commission," Social Services Building, San Francisco, CA.

Figures 23 and 24. “Valparaíso,” a woven wool and linen tapestry started out as a favorite postage stamp, the cartoon stamp size, which she used as a thumbnail sketch. She could translate and enlarge scale by eye when weaving without full sized cartoons.



Figure 25 (left). Tapestry Detail, Social Services Building commission.

Figure 26 (right). Four children, tapestry detail.

Figures 25 and 26. Her largest tapestry was a commission she wove for the Social Services Building in San Francisco, with the requirement that she “weave human compassion”. She chose to insert into this design, black and white newspaper images, one figure alone in a crowd and four faces of children, knowing that people who were waiting in line for their welfare checks might look up and see her work.

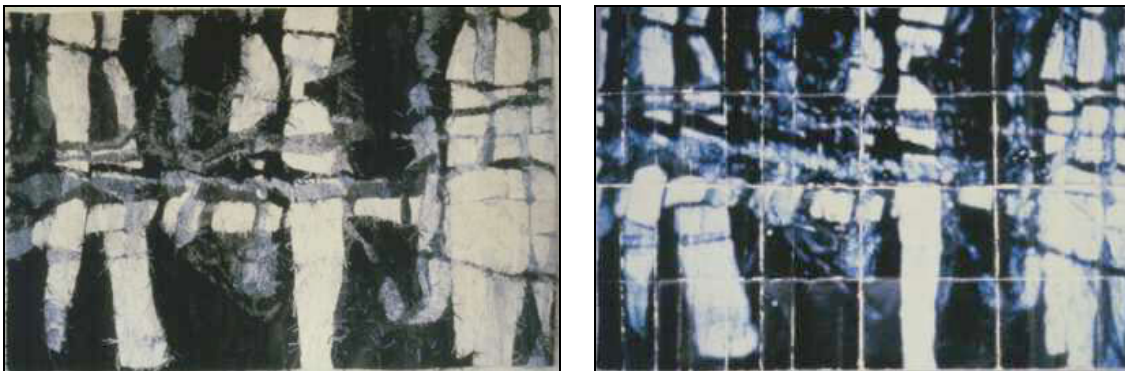


Figure 27 (left). “Twined Paper,” tapestry.

Figure 28 (right). Cartoon (photocopied image) for “Twined Paper.”

Figures 27 and 28. “Twined Paper.” Lillian never abandoned a technique she loved. She just kept returning to it, exploring further. Here is a color xerox of a detail of a collage she made using twining and silkscreened cloth; she wove that image as a tapestry. The fold marks indicate how she folded the photocopy in tiny sections, as she got to the part of the warp for the next section, in her mind, blowing the tiny image up, greatly enlarging it. She was a master at this visual translation.



Figure 29 (left). "Hayfield."

Figure 30 (right). Basket made of paper twine.

Figures 29 and 30. When Lillian began making basket-like forms, she experimented with materials which were stiff. She hated the soft, floppy baskets of the time and the huge 3-dimensional suspended "meditation chambers" that fiber artists were photographed sitting in, in the 1970s. Here she's taken stiff cordage and twined it together, then snipped some of the material, freeing it. She liked the spring it had, pushing into space, not wanting traditional, expected forms without surprise. In "Hayfield," she's using basketry materials, playing with the scale of elements, following her own individual technique for holding things together. Making baskets for her was like taking the best of ceramics, drawing, and textiles.



Figure 31 (left). "Goya."

Figure 32 (right). "Basket Tapestry."

Figures 31 and 32. "Goya" is one of Lillian's strongest black painted baskets. It holds some of the intensity of the frightening horror of war. She turned it on its side and created "Basket Tapestry" out of a detail, the edge of that 3-D form. Her own work led the way to the next work in unexpected ways, one thing building upon another.

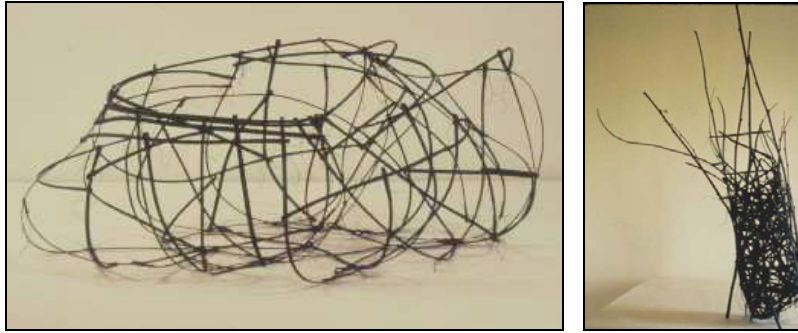


Figure 33 (left). "Drawn Form."

Figure 34 (right). "Shadow."

Figures 33 and 34. "Drawn Form" in linear bones conveyed Lillian's love of drawing - here minimal lines in space, describe the inner structure and the outer space simultaneously in the drawing and the form being drawn. Rossbach wrote of this piece, that it "recalls the linear quality of many Abstract Expressionist paintings. The work is restless and alive". Lillian always wanted to work big. She was expansive in her personality and in her work, "Shadow," a skeletal structure, reaches into space, moving outward, wanting more. She saw this as a calligraphic shape or gestural drawing. Black helped her see the form clearly, achieving the graphic quality she so desired. Her black line baskets had the intimacy of drawings, enlarged and direct, giving the work its visceral, emotional appeal.



Figure 35 (left). "Siblings."

Figure 36 (right). "Fez."

Figures 35 and 36. "Siblings." In 1992, Lillian bought birch bark, sheets of it, from Jim Widdess at the Caning Shop in Albany. The bark was so beautiful, she couldn't paint on it. She created a series of paired works, each different, column like. She struggled with the bottoms, whether these needed bottoms, and created different bottoms for each of them. She wanted her work to have air; the knots, so beautiful, in the birch bark acted as both entry and exit points; inside and outside equally important to her. Her stitching bark with waxed linen, with her needle piercing the natural bark skin, became her way to work both inner and outer surfaces. "Fez" was part of a series inspired by a Moroccan water jug which had boldness and assertive vigor in its decoration. She traveled the world through what she surrounded herself with, going there in her imagination. Though she

loved the sensuous quality of oil paint, by this time she was working almost entirely with acrylics for her bold marks on the surface.



Figure 37 (left). "Birch."

Figure 38 (right). "Sunsets."

Figures 37 and 38. "Birch," so enclosed and opaque with nature's interruptions. Lillian liked it when her baskets appeared to lift off the ground, rise above the flat surface a little, sitting well but not flat. She wanted shadows and air underneath the basket bottoms. Her years of training in ceramics meant that her large, wonderful hands knew volume; she brought that to her work even when she was no longer using clay. She always felt her pots were too heavy. She didn't want her baskets to look heavy. She thought with the eyes of one who knew the importance of the parts of a ceramic vessel—the foot, the lip, the body of the piece. She translated that into basketry materials and ended up feeling finally that she was getting what she wanted in her 3-dimensional work. "Sunsets," with subtle, glowing color is made of palm bark cloth, which grows loosely, naturally woven, allowing a feeling of air to pass through its porous membrane. Bark was an additive material for Elliott, working with it in hunks, so unlike the earlier fluid linear elements in her line drawing baskets.



Figure 39 (left). "Penland."

Figure 40 (right). "Cistern Column."

Figures 39 and 40. "Penland." When Lillian taught workshops elsewhere, she gathered materials which caught her eye, flying home with sticks and branches. She loved being invited to teach elsewhere; she especially loved having her way paid and receiving a paycheck. On a trip in 1990 to Turkey, she visited Istanbul's underground Roman cistern. Its grand columns with giant heads are now broken-off and upside down in the water. Lillian came home and created "Cistern Column."



*Figure 41 (left). "Ikebana."
Figure 42 (right). "Yi Dynasty."*

Figures 41 and 42. "Ikebana." Lillian never traveled to Japan or beyond, but there was such a strong influence in the Bay Area of beautiful Asian art—in museums, in shops, in the air. Lillian responded. And after going to an exhibition of Korean art at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, Lillian came home and painted strong, rich colors she associated with the Yi Dynasty, creating this work of that name. When Lillian used color or made marks on a surface, she wanted it to show. The thickness of paint, as she used it, made it become part of the structure too.



*Figure 43 (left). "Warm Form."
Figure 44 (right). "Cantilever."*

Figures 43 and 44. "Warm Form," a canvas upon which color was added, and "Cantilever" which austere suggests both the human figure precariously balanced, and an architectural form. Her work was sculptural. She called her work "baskets," not feeling the need to call them "sculptural baskets". She respected and admired traditional baskets, took a class once from a Pomo basketmaker. But the coiling technique felt smothering and wasn't "right" for her work. She was part of the growing contemporary basket scene here, intending that her baskets be different from what others had done

before. Rossbach was quietly creating his baskets, but she didn't see much of them, as he mostly didn't exhibit them until after he retired. His books "Baskets as Textile Art" in '73 and in '76 "The New Basketry" had a powerful impact on Lillian and provided a direction she wanted to continue to explore, along with everything else.



Figure 45 (left). "Mummy Bundle."

Figure 46 (right). "Wheat."

Figures 45 and 46. The local Caning Shop threw out old chair bottoms, which on Thursdays were free for the taking. We made regular runs. To my knowledge, only Lillian transformed them, as in this piece she called, "Mummy Bundle". When Jim, the owner of the Caning Shop, got in a new material, Lillian would be delighted. She'd play with it, creating a new piece, then take that piece with her when she and Roy went to see the Rossbachs. Often as not, Ed and Katherine would have picked up that same material that week, each of them going their own direction with it. The materials which became available, which they found independently of each other, or which they learned of from each other, fueled an ongoing and re-energized exchange, with ideas and comment going back and forth all the time, encouraging ever more experimentation. Despite each of them talking of the isolation they felt in Berkeley, they acted as a very significant community of three for each other. "Wheat," one of Lillian's favorites, allowed her to explore both warp and weft twining. But she cared so much less about the technique she used; she was concerned about the form and its impact—what something was.



Figure 47. "Marked Space."

Figure 48. "Netted Square."

Figures 47 and 48. "Marked Space" feels monumental, as if it could be a maquette for a very large sculptural form. "Netted Square" was a new way of working for Lillian, (a made up individual technique for her) making cedar bark strips into hinges, attaching

them, one to another with colored waxed linen, building units, allowing openings, negative space to be part of this construction. She wanted to let air in.



Figure 49 (left). "Troy."
Figure 50 (right). "Embroidered Rattan."

Figures 49 and 50. "Troy" made of pleated paper placemats became architectural with layers stitched together, into strips, leaving entrances and exits. She felt her most boring baskets were those made of traditional materials and traditional techniques. She tried to remember to take crude, gross, ugly material and transform it, saying something beyond the material or process. She was *not* a purist in terms of natural materials; she imposed her will on whatever materials her hands touched. "Embroidered Rattan," also made in elaborately worked, stitched strips was one of the last and strongest, most joyous works, playfully integrating surface and structure. Rossbach wrote of Elliott's baskets, "like all of her works, they are bold and direct, supercharged with energy and plainly concerned with activating space."

I often pushed her to talk about the ideas she was trying for in her work. She would speak then about materials, processes, techniques, color and form. Or about the inside and the outside of a basket, how they are in constant visual exchange, about marking "real" space and enclosing form as well as the "outside" space. She saw her baskets as the result of "playing" with materials while aiming toward combining various shapes to achieve a total form.



Figure 51. Lillian Elliott creating structure for "Romany."
Figure 52. "Romany" by Lillian Elliott/Pat Hickman, Lausanne 1985, "Textiles as Sculpture."



Figure 53. "Whitewashed Lines," by Lillian Elliott/Pat Hickman.

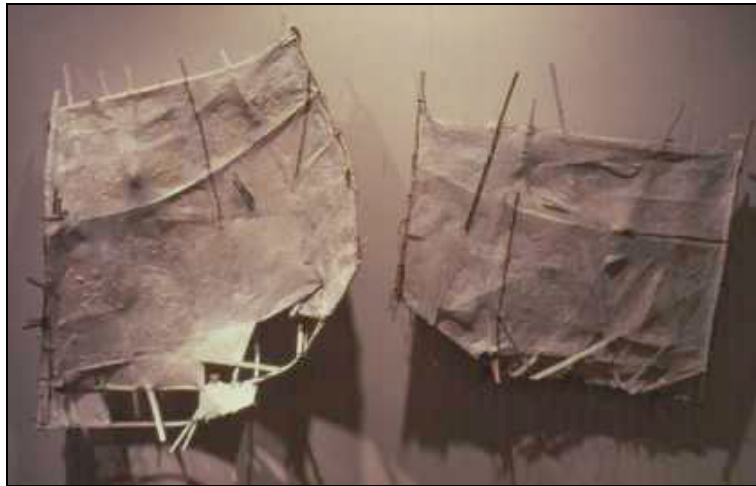


Figure 54. "Whitewashed Lines," detail, by Lillian Elliott/Pat Hickman.

Figures 51- 54. Here is Lillian inside an 8' high basketry form she is building in my dining room. In our collaboration, she built the structure, I provided the skin surface membrane. Collaboration was one small part of the body of work Lillian did. This work was in the Lausanne Biennial in 1985, Textiles as Sculpture. We had, of course, to cut it apart not only to get it out of my house but to ship it to Switzerland. In between the Fiberworks Gallery in Berkeley gave us the opportunity to play with the parts, installing them as a wall piece. In the end, we preferred it this way, calling it "Whitewashed Lines."

Lillian and I team taught a lot. The Bay Area was very competitive with big artist egos—so many well trained people coming out of UCB and CCAC, all wanting to stay in the area. There were not enough tenure track positions at these institutions to give us all teaching jobs. Lillian always said she wanted a tenure track position; she wanted the security of a regular job and pay check. But most institutions didn't know what to do with her. The word "moderation" was not in her vocabulary. You might say she had *attitude*, and an *edge* to her. She was sharply critical, sometimes outrageous, and very opinionated with clarity about almost everything. I personally think a full time job with all its

administrivia would have killed Lillian. It certainly would have demanded time from her creating in the studio.

We decided rather than compete for crumbs, we'd rather enjoy team teaching. We had a good time, teaching whatever we dreamed up, offering it at Pacific Basin School of Textile Arts or Fiberworks, or wherever; it didn't matter to us. We appreciated all that was happening then in the area, from all of the institutions and from whomever passed through. Lillian was recognized and honored to be selected in 1985 as a Living Treasure of California and elected as a Fellow of the American Craft Council in 1990.



*Figure 55 (left). "Taut", Lillian Elliott/Pat Hickman.
Figure 56 (right). "Opening," Lillian Elliott/Pat Hickman.*

Figures 55 and 56. Lillian's individual work was generally linear, often black and usually rather complicated. Our collaborative work was simpler in structure than Lillian's individual work.



*Figure 57 (left). "Patched", Lillian Elliott/Pat Hickman.
Figure 58 (right). "Tectonic Plates", Lillian Elliott/Pat Hickman.*

Figures 57 and 58. "Patched" and "Tectonic Plates" One of the things we encouraged was a kind of boldness that might have been harder to have alone. When we didn't like "Patched" at first, we cut into it and turned it inside out. After it came back from being exhibited and we felt it didn't have the life it had when we sent it out *and* after an earthquake, the piece was still around and we decided to further cut into it, rearranging parts, creating its next shape and form.



Figure 59 (left). “Leaf Basket.”

Figure 60 (right). Basket image painted on shipping boxes.

Figures 59 and 60. “Leaf Basket” was made after Lillian had time in Hawaii teaching or jurying. She came back with a leaf, which she manipulated simply and instantly and asked me to cover it. There were challenges with the collaboration. It was not always easy with big differences in personality. But we continued to encourage each other, looking critically at our work, coming up with new conceptual ideas we wanted to try. For example, after getting very tired of packing and unpacking boxes and shipping work, we decided to paint on the outside the image of the basket permanently sealed inside that box. We proposed an installation exhibiting a room full of boxed baskets, with us sitting surrounded by our work, much like 19th century images of Native American basket makers who are surrounded by their baskets. We’d sit in the midst of this—a statement of our time and UPS and FED EX limits—and make more baskets. No institution ever bought that idea nor gave us that opportunity!



Figure 61. Lillian Elliott working in her studio, stitching birch bark.

Figure 62. Lillian Elliott’s name, in lights.

Figures 61 and 62. Lillian touched so many of us who were lucky enough to be her colleagues, students and friends. Her work consistently had a connecting thread back to textile history and forward into new territory. She did that as a Board member for TSA early on. So it is a fitting tribute to use the occasions of the Symposium banquets to announce each newly selected Lillian Elliott awardee, a grant established to honor both Lillian and Joanne Segal Brandford.

Lillian lived passionately, fiercely, urgently driven in her life’s work. The Bay Area is the richer for her bigger than life presence and for her remarkable, innovative art. She often said about her artwork, “You take your heart in your hands and try.” The legacy of these words resonates still, expressing her generous spirit and attitude toward art and life.