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## **The Lausanne International Tapestry Biennials (1962-1995) The Pivotal Role of a Swiss City in the “New Tapestry” Movement in Eastern Europe After World War II**

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Today I will be looking at the emergence of new forms of tapestry at the Lausanne Biennials in the 1960s and 70s, and concentrating on the artists who worked in some of the Soviet satellite countries (Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria) during that period. Those countries had come under Soviet control after the Yalta agreement signed between the Western powers and the Soviet Union at the end of the Second World War.

In those days, the French artist Jean Lurçat was a leading European figure as the main artist behind the revival of tapestry after WWII. He had gathered around him major contemporary painters such as Le Corbusier, Manessier and Picasso and persuaded them to design tapestry projects. In the 1950s Lurçat was himself a very successful artist exhibiting worldwide. He was not a weaver, but a painter, a ceramist and a cartoonist and most of his works were woven in the famous workshops in the historic French city of Aubusson.

Alice and Pierre Pauli, a couple of art lovers from Lausanne, had met Lurçat in the early 1950s and keenly followed his activities and exhibitions. Together, they came up with the idea of holding biennial tapestry shows in Lausanne, then a small city with no textile tradition of its own. This was back in 1959. And Pierre Pauli and Jean Lurçat managed to obtain the enthusiastic support of local politicians. In 1961, thanks to the impetus provided by these two men, CITAM (the International Centre for Modern and Ancient Tapestry) was created and Lausanne became the centre of contemporary tapestry, a status it retained for more than three decades. In 1964, Pierre Pauli was appointed the first curator of the Decorative Arts Museum in Lausanne and remained the curator of the Lausanne Tapestry Biennials until his death in 1970. From 1962 to 1995, CITAM put on 16 tapestry shows.

The artists exhibiting at the first Lausanne Biennial in 1962 were all selected by national committees in their own countries. Although Western Europe predominated, especially France with 14 artists, there were also a few artists from Japan and the US. And surprisingly, out of the 58 artists exhibiting in all, 10 were from Eastern and Central Europe. Most of the tapestries displayed at the first Lausanne Biennial were figurative, and all of them were very large. At the time, tapestry was still considered a mural art, directly related to architecture, and exhibition regulations required that tapestries measured at least 12 square metres.

The majority of works exhibited were made in the traditional manner, that is, designed by the artists but woven in professional workshops. The Polish artists were a notable exception because they carried out the weaving themselves. At that time, Polish weavers were virtually unknown outside their own country, except for a few who had been lucky enough to participate in the 1957 Milan Design Triennial. Polish artists in general were relatively unknown in the West, apart from those who had emigrated before the war. Most painters, sculptors and performers had to wait until after the fall of the Berlin wall, in 1989, to

be discovered by Western audiences. The Polish room at the first Lausanne Biennial (figure 1) aroused considerable interest, so let us investigate what lay behind that strong body of works.



*Figure 1*  
*First Lausanne International Tapestry Biennial, 1962*  
*Works by J. Owidzka, M. Abakanowicz and W. Sadley*  
*Alice Pauli Archives*

Compared to other countries, crafts in Poland held a position of privilege. In the 1960s applied arts were often taught in the same academies as fine arts, such as painting, which meant that most artists were familiar with the tradition of tapestry and weaving. However, most of the workshops that used to produce tapestries from cartoons, woven by professional weavers, had been destroyed during the war so that artists who wanted to express themselves through the medium of tapestry had to carry out the weaving themselves. This brought about a huge change in the finished pieces.

Two major figures stand out among the first generation of artists, born around the turn of the nineteenth century, who paved the way for the success of Polish textile art, Zofia Butrymowicz and Maria Łaskiewicz, who had studied in Munich and Paris before the war. In 1951, Łaskiewicz founded the Experimental Weaving Workshop of the Polish Association of Artists in Warsaw and encouraged young artists to use this medium. She herself was a pioneer, experimenting with new techniques and materials. (figure 2)

But the name that springs to everybody's mind in connection with Lausanne in the 1960's is, undoubtedly, that of Magdalena Abakanowicz. When her first personal show in the Kordegarda Gallery in Warsaw in 1960 was banned, Łaskiewicz entered her name for the first Lausanne Biennial. The regulatory size requirements were often a major problem for the artists, but Abakanowicz managed to weave her *Composition with White Forms* (figure 1) on the one and only large loom available in the Łaskiewicz Experimental Workshop. Fine materials for tapestry-making such as finely spun wool, silk and linen were not available in impoverished post-war Poland, so the artists turned to various alternative materials available such as coarsely spun wool, sisal, hemp, rope and cotton, and used natural dyes.

Abakanowicz's work attracted immediate international attention and that same year she had her first personal shows in galleries in Lausanne and Paris.



**Figure 2**  
**Maria Łaskiewicz (Poland)**  
***Solitude*, 1970, sisal, linen, wood, 300x80 cm**  
**5th Lausanne Tapestry Biennial, 1971**  
**© Fondation Toms Pauli**

Art history is not only written by the artists themselves but also by friends, collectors, gallery owners and curators who are willing to take risks and make the works known. Prompted by Jean Lurçat, Pierre Pauli made his first trip to Poland in 1960 to visit the workshops of some of the well-known artists, and discover new ones. Other visits followed during that decade. As a neutral country, Switzerland was not involved in the post-WWII Cold War spheres of influence, which certainly made travelling easier. Pierre Pauli's wife, Alice Pauli, opened her first art gallery in Lausanne in 1962, and immediately started organising personal exhibitions for many of the artists who exhibited at the Biennials. For years, she dealt with the bureaucratic trials and tribulations of importing the works, inviting the artists, and arranging payment. She was later awarded the Order of Merit by the Polish government for her loyal support. The Alice Pauli Gallery was also of prime importance locally as it served to create a network of collectors and tapestry enthusiasts, who in turn helped, supported and welcomed the artists when they came to Lausanne. This was the case of Pierre and Marguerite Magnenat who collected more than 70 textile artworks between 1965 and 1985 (figure 3). Their collection was donated to the Toms Pauli Foundation in 2005. In the US a few years later, Jacques and Anne Baruch provided similar support to Polish artists through the gallery they opened in Chicago in 1967.

The Polish artists who worked in tapestry in the 1960s were largely graduates of schools of painting and sculpture. Textile art was part of their culture but they looked at it with new eyes and moved in a dramatically new direction. They felt free to experiment with new materials and techniques, and were nicknamed the ‘new barbarians’.



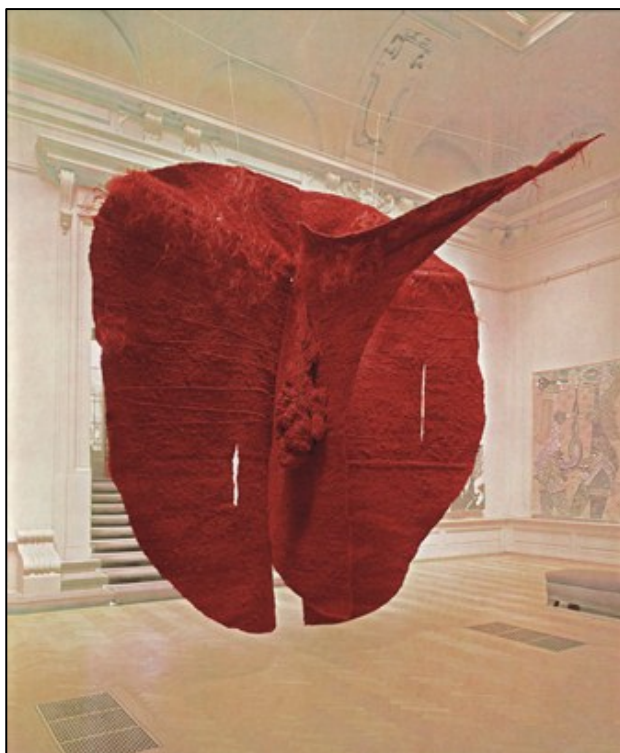
**Figure 3**  
**The Abakanowicz Room**  
**Pierre and Marguerite Magnenat Collection, Lausanne**  
**© Fondation Toms Pauli**

By the late 1960s, traditional tapestry was being seriously challenged by the first monumental, three-dimensional textile sculptures such as the *Abakan Red* (figure 4) by Magdalena Abakanowicz. The artist named her work «Abakan» (after her own name) because no art object of this kind had ever been seen before and no suitable name for it existed. It was unlike anything anyone had ever seen and the public were shocked by this artist who seemed concerned only with structure and monumental scale - and who would later become a sculptress and stop working in textile altogether.

These new textile sculptures aroused a lot of criticism, especially from the French tapestry artists who had, for the most part, remained close to tradition. To allow these new tendencies to find expression, CITAM decided to appoint its own jury for nominating artists and reserved special exhibition space for experimental pieces. From that moment on, it became clear that Lausanne was witnessing the birth of a new language. In keeping with Lurçat's original intention, CITAM never awarded prizes at the Lausanne Biennials preferring to serve as a 'seismograph' of contemporary textile creativity and not as a judge.



Wojciech Sadley, Maria Chojnacka, Jolanta Owidzka, Barbara Levittoux-Swiderska, Janina Tworek-Pierzgalska were among the many artists born around 1930 who made a name for themselves in the field of tapestry. For most of them, Lausanne was their very first opportunity to exhibit outside their own country. Artists from most Iron Curtain countries were not allowed free travel, and needed a letter of invitation to go abroad.



*Figure 4*  
*Magdalena Abakanowicz (Poland)*  
*Abakan Red, 1969*  
*Sisal, 400 x 400 x 350 cm*  
*4th Lausanne Tapestry Biennial*  
*CITAM Archives*

The Lausanne exhibitions were a success right from the start. Every other year, an average of 20'000 visitors came to Lausanne (a city which then had just over 110'000 inhabitants) and the Biennials soon attracted a wide international audience. The Lausanne Biennials also enjoyed a considerable impact outside Switzerland because many of the exhibitions travelled abroad, often in a reduced version. The 1969 Biennial went to the Gobelins in Paris and the 1971 show travelled to Warsaw. When Polish officials realized that national artists were winning international acclaim, new opportunities arose within Poland itself and, in 1972, the first Łódź Triennale came into being. Although the first Łódź exhibition only accepted Polish artists, by 1975 it had become international and continues on to this day.

A similar analysis holds true for textile artists from other Iron Curtain countries. The Yugoslav artist, Jagoda Buić, was one of most successful artists to exhibit in Lausanne. She began her career in her own

country as a theatre costume designer but later turned to textile art. After her Lausanne debut in 1965, she began weaving environments with heavy woven elements (figure 5).



**Figure 5**  
**Jagoda Buić (Yugoslavia)**  
***Moving forms on water, 1973***  
**330x130 cm (x15)**  
**6th Lausanne Tapestry Biennial**  
**CITAM Archives**



**Figure 6**  
**Ritzi and Peter Jacobi (Romania)**  
***Textile Relief, 1981***  
**Cotton, goat hair, sisal, 155x170 cm**  
**© Fondation Toms Pauli**

In Romania, the celebrated artist couple, Ritzi and Peter Jacobi, worked together during the 1960s and 1970s introducing new materials and inventing new techniques to achieve their artistic vision (figure 6). Much of the freshness of what soon became known as the ‘new tapestry’ movement lay in juxtaposing and rearranging various fibres with a focus on the material itself.

The Lausanne shows had a far-reaching and sometimes unexpected impact. In 1986, the Varbanov Tapestry Art Institute at the Hangzhou China Academy of Art was founded by the Bulgarian artist, Maryn Varbanov, who together with his Chinese wife, Sung, had exhibited in Lausanne in the 1960s. And that same year, three Chinese art works were exhibited for the very first time at the Lausanne Biennials.

It was not the original intention of most of the artists I have mentioned in my presentation to develop a career in weaving or in textile art. However, the Lausanne Tapestry Biennials gave them the opportunity to express themselves freely and compare their creative ideas with those of other contemporary artists active in the rest of the world. Moreover, the enthusiastic network of supporters based in Lausanne, and the world-wide appeal and impact of the Biennials no doubt played a defining role in launching their international careers.