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### Tapestries in transition

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
The College of Fine and Applied Arts  
in Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

TAPESTRIES IN TRANSITION

By

Dana Berendt Loud

May, 1984

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## INTRODUCTION

The objective of this thesis is to explore drapery and fabric studies through the use of tapestry techniques. It is intended that these portrayals will convey volume, depth and a sense of richness through the use of fabric as their subject. These tapestries will employ a classical approach in an attempt to combine drawing and weaving in a unique and fresh manner.

## INFLUENCES

A long-time appreciation for historical textiles led to the choice of tapestry as the medium for this thesis. An early encounter with the sumptuous tapestries of The Lady and the Unicorn in the Musee de Cluny in Paris made a lasting impression, influencing my tastes as well as an interest in textiles, years before my becoming a weaver.

The six huge tapestries are displayed in a hexagonal room, in which they are the only exhibit. Seeing them was to be surrounded by an extraordinary elegance, from which it was impossible to dissociate the remarkable achievement of the weavers and their craft. The two most pronounced characteristics of these Gothic tapestries present a challenging goal: "One is complete mastery of their craft; the other precise concern for, and control of, color.... Color joins and contour shading are handled with astonishing skill."<sup>1</sup>

The development of drawing skills has had a direct relationship to the tapestries planned for this thesis. The approach has been a rather literal one, an effort to draw what I saw. Many hours of looking and "seeing" have brought a better understanding of shadow and light and the part they play in creating the illusion of dimension.



It has also become clearer that even the most realistic rendering of a subject is still simply one's personal interpretation. Intensive studies of the masters notwithstanding, my personal style has come from within.

As drawing work progressed the area of drapery studies struck a responsive chord and consistently produced the most successful drawings. This aspect of the drawings held double meaning for a Textile major and seemed to be a logical and natural focus for these woven works.

## HISTORICAL APPLICATIONS

A distinct preference for the Gothic tapestries, of the 12th to 16th centuries, leads to a discussion of the changes in tapestry, with the beginning of the Renaissance, which involved tapestry as painting.

The early tapestries were mainly practical in nature, serving to cover walls and provide warmth. As their use became more one of decoration, the various subjects depicted could be religious, historical, scenes of daily life, and also allegorical and fanciful as in The Lady and the Unicorn, The Hunt of the Unicorn, and the many mille fleurs tapestries.

These tapestries have a simplicity and elegance deriving both from their subject and the weaver's use of his craft. In many cases the weaver had a good measure of choice as he worked from the cartoonist's diagram, and much of the background detail and methods of shading were left up to him.<sup>2</sup>

As new standards of taste evolved in the Renaissance, tapestry makers were influenced as well. "From being a free and creative art, as in its great Gothic days, tapestry-making sank to the rank first of an interpretative, and then of an imitative art.... But from the time of the change tapestry's aim became more and more simply to find the means

of copying more and more faithfully the accents and modulations of painting."<sup>3</sup>

It was not until the 20th century, and the work of Jean Lurcat in France, that the weaver again became both artist and craftsman.<sup>4</sup>

In a direct response to this historical research, the tapestries presented here are the result of drawings specifically designed as cartoons for tapestries, yet at the same time are strongly influenced by a personal drawing style. It is interesting that each has influenced the other. In designing a tapestry the weaver must work with the ever-present vertical warp and horizontal weft. The subject here is in direct contrast, however, with the fluidity and curves, the fullness and depth which draped fabric possesses. To resolve this contradiction a drawing style evolved which portrayed these flowing aspects through straight lines. The drawing and shading lines correspond to the horizontal weft lines.

This method combined basic elements of weaving and drawing. A means of blending colors to produce a new color or shading in weaving is called "hatching," and a means of representing shadow and light in drawing is called "cross-hatching." Drawing the shading lines with vertical straight lines, eliminating the "cross" from cross-hatching closely approximates the weaving process that takes place on the loom.

It has been the intent here to preserve the drawing-weaving lines so that the tapestries will look handwoven. Barbara Bertram, in A History of Tapestry, states, "Designing for tapestry can only be satisfactorily carried out by someone who understands the technique of tapestry weaving. The appearance of the finished product should be expressive of the method used in fashioning it."<sup>5</sup>

## TECHNICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND PROCESS

Compared to other methods of weaving, tapestry entails the closest involvement of the weaver. This "weaver-controlled" approach involves putting in the colors by hand, often changing a single strand to achieve gradual shading.

Certain technical aspects of the weaving of these tapestries are worthy of mention for their effect on the general appearance of the pieces.

Each tapestry was begun and ended with plain weave, to provide a hem fabric thinner than the main body of the tapestry. Though the installation of a heddle rod and pick-up stick was necessary to achieve this, the end result was well worth the extra time and effort required to set up and to weave the hems.

To preserve as consistent a width as possible, the warp was kept very tight, there was generous bubbling of the weft yarns, and the width was measured regularly to monitor and maintain it.

The weaving was carried out all the way across each row rather than building up individual areas. This enabled the use of the beater during the entire piece to ensure a firm, even beat and maintain the straight lines in the horizontal weft. This was also necessary with so many interconnected areas of shading.



All of these tapestries were woven sideways on the loom. This was determined by the fact that there were more vertical lines in each piece than horizontal, and it is easier to create a smooth line horizontally or at a slight angle than to build it vertically.

A primary raison d'etre of these pieces was to present the curves and flow of draped fabric. The challenge of the control of these curves had to be accomplished through the natural "stepping" effect created as the horizontal color joins were made and moved from one vertical warp thread to the next. In effect, the illusion of curves was created rather than a truly curved line. This took extreme care and precision, as well as the use of a few tricks. Experiments showed that certain systems could build a rather good curve when conditions were right. This might involve as minute a detail as whether a warp thread was raised or lowered when the weft passed around it, or how many threads to move over as an angle was built. Sometimes it was possible to "pad" a join with a supplementary weft thread to help achieve the desired angle. When an angle was of necessity severely stepped, the normal sewing up of the resulting slits could be done in such a way as to soften the steps into a gentler curve. This was only necessary in a few areas on two of the pieces. All the other slits were sewn from the back of the tapestry, so the curves appear just as they were woven.

Along with these focal points of hard-edged lines and curves was a balance of softer, freer areas of shading.

There was a contrast in the working of these areas: the tight control of the curves and the almost arbitrary or random hatching of the shaded areas created a working rhythm, moving from concentration to relaxation in each row. Certain areas were dictated, others could develop with more freedom.

In contrast to the drawing process in which any area could be worked on and altered as the whole piece developed, once well past a specific area of a tapestry it was virtually impossible to change it. To make one small improvement could involve unweaving many days' work. Therefore it was essential to step back many times to assure that the desired effect was being created and to see if immediate changes were needed as the weaving proceeded.

The distinctive look of tapestry when viewed as a fait accompli is intriguing in its texture and particularly with respect to the placement of color. While in fact it may have been carefully planned or instinctive or impulsive, there is a finality that gives no indication of the deliberation or emotion that might have taken place. Laya Brostoff comments on this aspect of tapestry, "A brushstroke made slowly is entirely different from one made quickly. A pick laid in slowly simply takes more time, but assuming that the technique is adequate, looks no different than a pick entered quickly."<sup>6</sup>

## USE OF COLOR

Color cannot help but play an important part as a tapestry is translated from paper to yarn. In a drawing an image can fade in and out, and the paper plays a significant role. In making a tapestry, the textured surface is created by the process itself, as yarn, and therefore color, is applied to 100 percent of the work.

It was not the specific intention for the pieces to have this in common, yet there has been a consistent and somewhat unusual approach to color. The first three pieces have darkly colored, though different kinds of backgrounds. The treatment of the drapery in all of them has, in effect, been monochromatic. Although the idea of depicting decorated or patterned fabric was originally a possibility, the involvement with rendering the configurations of the cloth itself assumed more importance at this time. Working with many shades and values from light to dark, and constantly changing these for effect, made each pick full of "color" decisions.

The fourth tapestry used a scale from the lightest grey to deep black, which was certainly a departure from convention. Some would regard this as the absence of color, but here it was considered as the others had been, a range of color value. It is significant that using the grey scale



related the tapestry closely both to the graphite drawing, and the idea of statues from which the piece is derived.

In striving for richness and depth, combinations of colors were presented, with wefts comprised of more than one value of yarn. Rarely was an area rendered in a flat color.

## FINISHING

Final presentation of the tapestries was an important consideration. Ideally a tapestry should hang freely in the proper setting. Because of their small size some method was necessary to set them off, but conventional framing would not be appropriate with the tactile aspect of tapestry.

Each piece was stretched over a 1/8 inch piece of plexiglas into which 4 holes had been drilled and four screws set. Cloth tape was sewn on the back of each, 1/8 inch from the selvages. Heavy duty carpet thread was used to lash these tapes at 1/2 inch intervals from top to bottom across the back, and then to lash the woven hems across from side to side. This provide a very secure and compact means of stretching and blocking the tapestry, and served to square the edges perfectly.

The stretched tapestry was then mounted on a fabric-covered plywood panel which had corresponding holes drilled so that the panel could be attached to the tapestry from the back. Four small bumpers on the back assured that the piece would be slightly removed from the wall yet hang completely flat.

The finished appearance, in keeping with both the medium of the work and the subject, was simple, straightforward, and most effective.

## THE INDIVIDUAL TAPESTRIES

### Athens

The first study originated from drawings made of fabric from Greece that had been repeatedly draped until it was "casually" positioned so as to create graceful curves and folds, a feeling of depth, and to cast a shadow. An original attempt to render the patterns in the stripe was not successful, so the stripe was represented as plain though it changed in value as it passed in and out of shadow and light.

With both the fabric and the background rendered in basically cool colors, a deep red was interspersed randomly within the blue background to introduce warmth and richness.

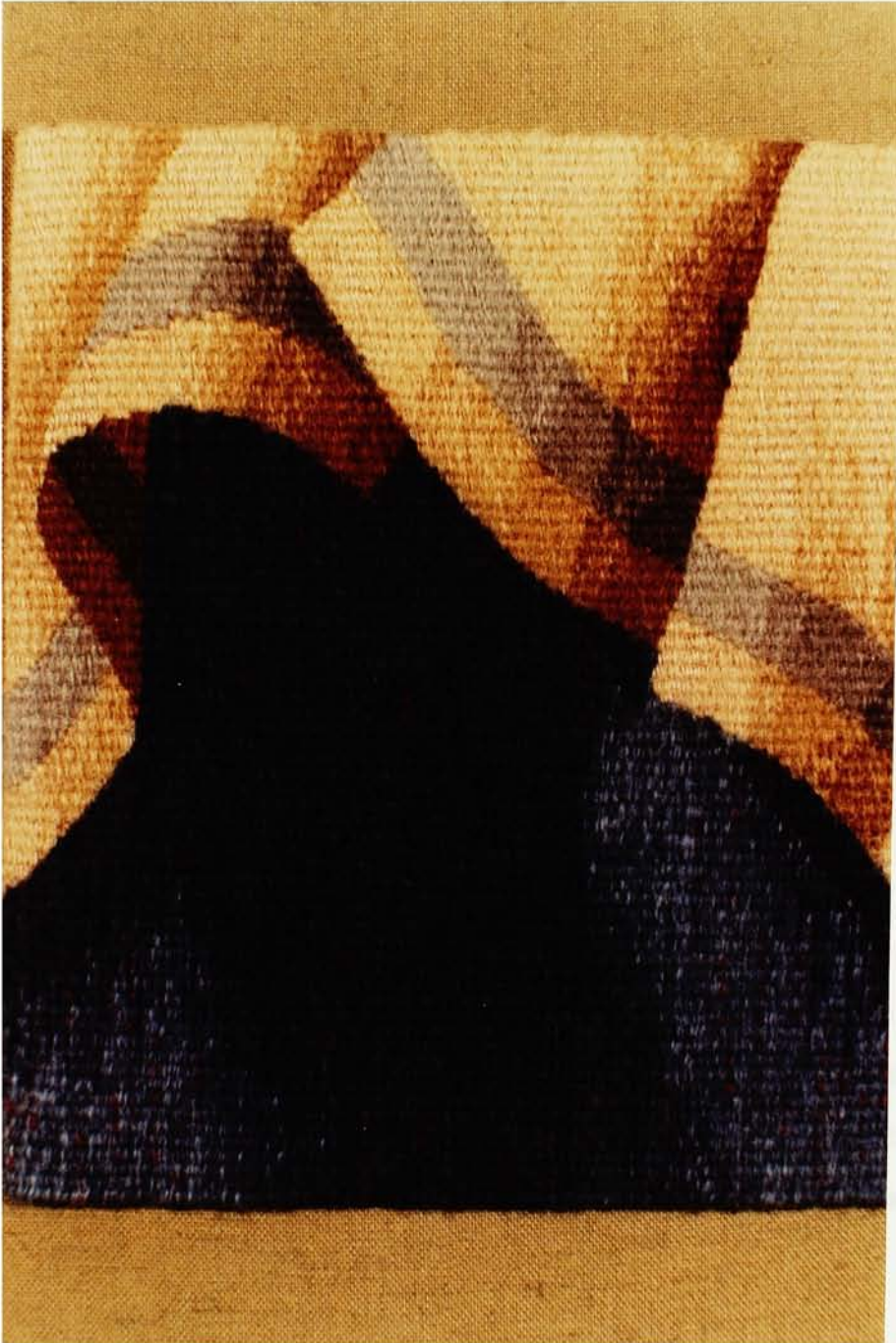
Though the fabric is stationary, there is definite movement and flow to the design as the eye follows along the edge of the cloth and under it into the deepest shadow. For such a small piece it reads surprisingly well from a distance.

With 16 ends per inch in the warp it was possible to create believable curves, which was an important objective for the work to come.



1. Athens





2. Athens (Detail)

Rome

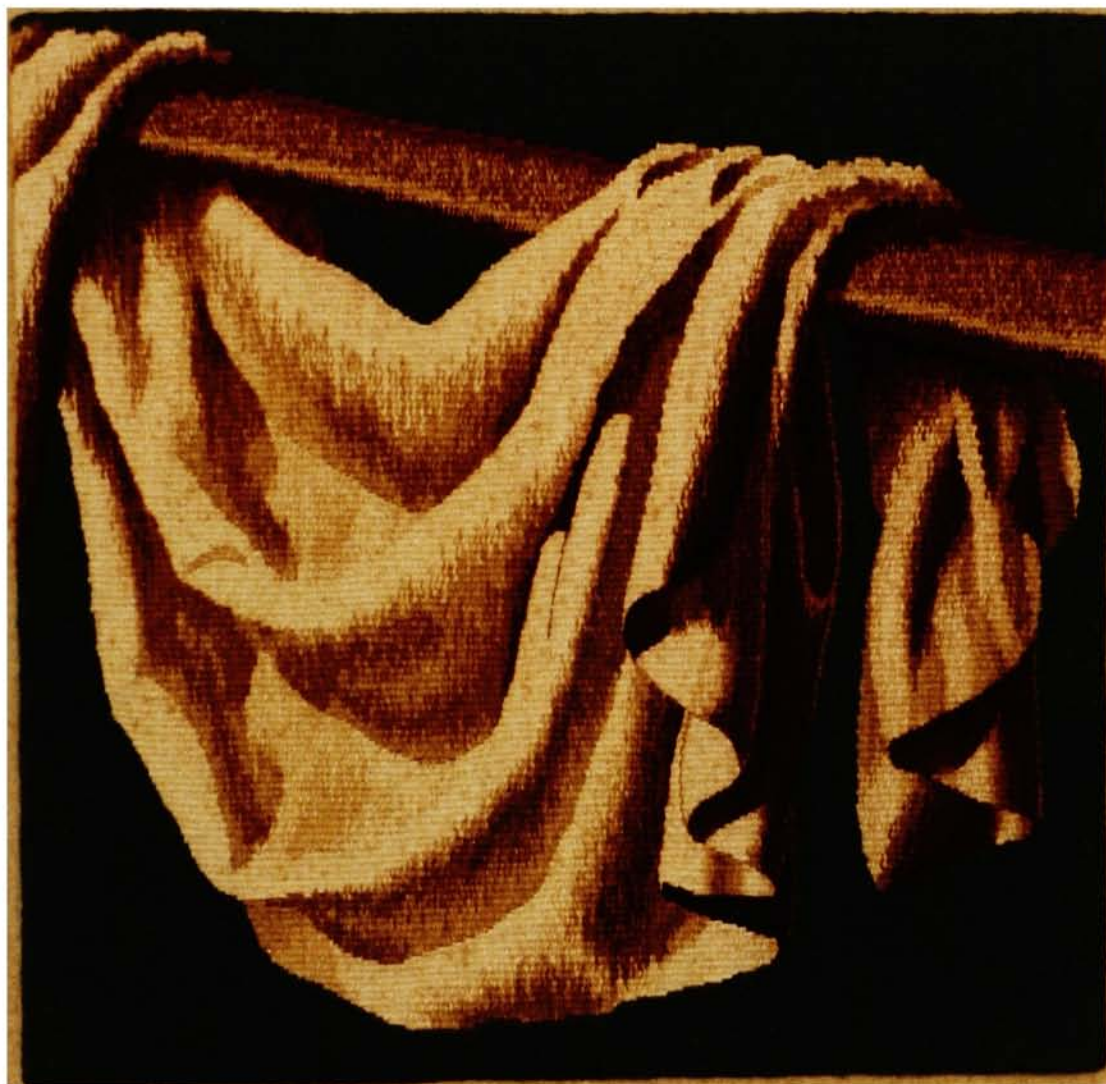
Arriving at the cartoon and working drawing for this tapestry was a complicated process. The initial idea came from the draped fabric on the statue of the Apollo Belvedere in the Vatican Museum. Efforts to duplicate the drape and fall of this fabric met with difficulty. An important discovery was that the cloth must first be cut into a circular shape for the edge folds to turn over as desired. Eventually, though, the fabric had to be manipulated and tied back to achieve a similar configuration, with the important negative space. Although actual fabric would not conform to what had been carved in stone, a satisfactory gestural image was finally achieved.

The focal point of this work is the lower right quarter where the most intricate folds curve back and forth in the highest contrast of light and shade. The rest of the fabric radiates away from this area into a more overall lightness, with reflected light coming into play, before reaching another area of contrast in the upper left.

The execution of this piece was extremely time-consuming, again using 16 ends per inch, and the capability of fine curves. Working across a row the weaver would encounter a myriad of events taking place as areas entered into and out of light, shadow, folds, curves, the bannister,

and the background. It was somewhat like conducting an orchestra to keep track and be aware of the ever-changing requirements at each point.

The background was designed to contrast with but not compete with the fabric. It reveals a subtle geometric pattern only to the viewer who comes within very close range.



3. Rome





4. Rome (Detail)

### Venice

The subject of this piece was derived from a scarf, purchased on the Rialto, which had been folded into a triangle and then the corners knotted. It was placed in direct light on a rug. The drawing did have a vitality and character which was a challenge to translate into tapestry, though it seemed suitable.

The central area of interest worked well in terms of achieving the folds and curves as they emanated from the knot. A 20/2 perle cotton was used to bring out the highlights and provide a measure of sheen to indicate a silky fabric juxtaposed with the textured background. It was necessary to use a more organic and primitive approach to the actual knotted section since many details took place in an extremely small area.

The upper left area posed the problem of having several design lines which came on or close to the vertical warp as the piece was woven. Though natural in the composition, it resulted in those lines being severely angular compared to the other contours. Judicious sewing together of those slits produced a smoothness compatible with the rest of the piece.









6. Venice (Detail)

### Paris

The final tapestry, incorporating a number of new developments in the designing, was a bolder expression of the theme, and the probable direction for future works. Instead of having a figure and ground, the entire picture plane was taken up with fabric, although the pipey folds at the bottom set off the many layers above.

The robes of the Gothic sculptures on many of the French cathedrals influenced the content of this piece. However the Statue of Liberty provided the main source, though it was subjected to reproportioning. When none of the various color schemes attempted had the same impact as the initial graphite drawing, the decision was made to weave the tapestry in shades of grey.

The weaving of this tapestry was the least problematical of the four works. This had partly to do with the design being compatible with the process, with using 12 ends per inch in the warp and three strands at a time in the weft, as well as with the previous experience gained.



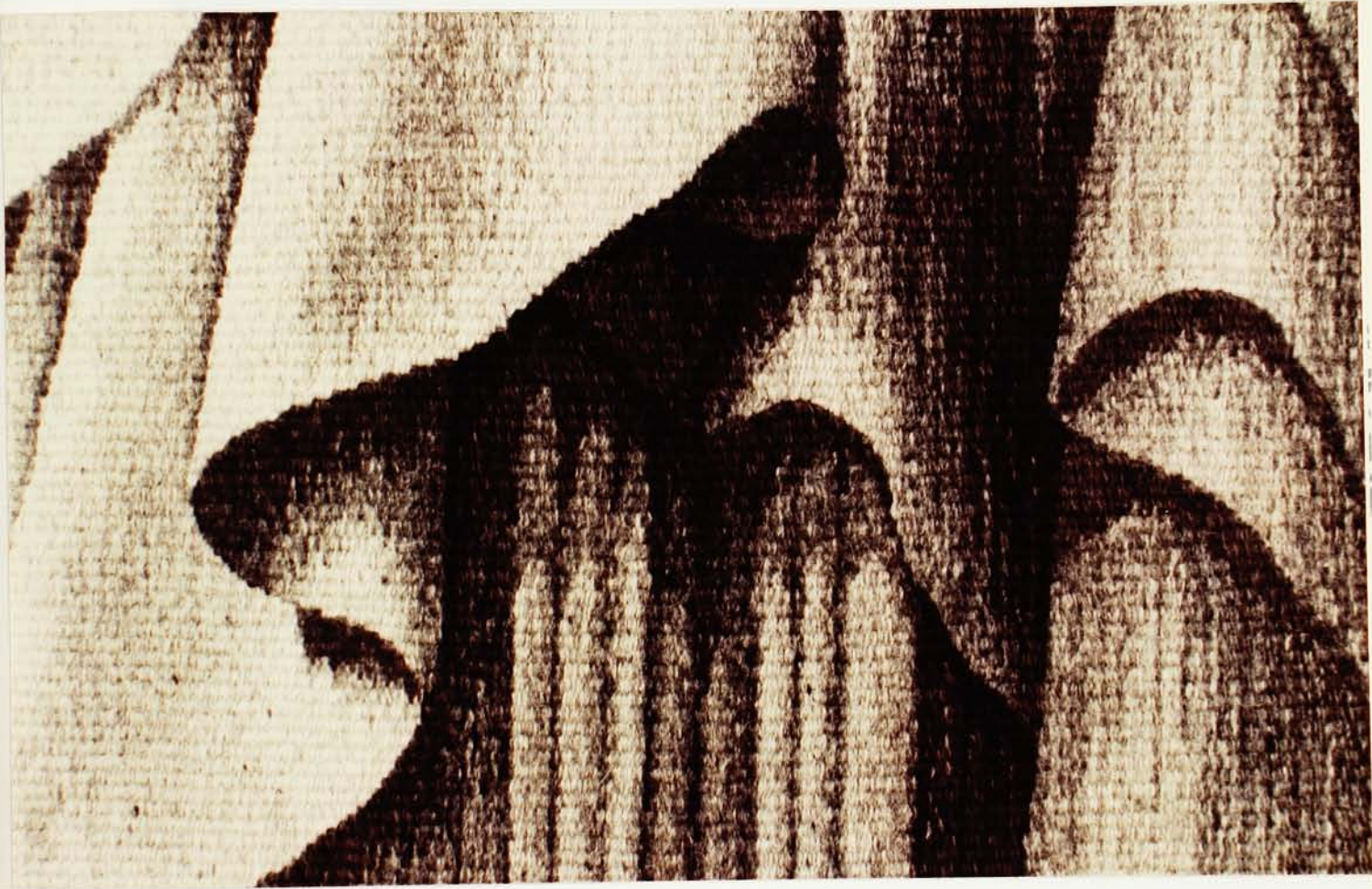


7. Paris



8. Paris (Detail)





9. Paris (Detail)



## STATISTICS

<u>Athens</u>	Sett: 16 e.p.i. Warp: 8/4 cotton carpet warp Weft: Wool, silk Finished size -- width: 11 1/2" height: 8 3/4"	Framed: 19 1/8" 17 3/8"
<u>Rome</u>	Sett: 16 e.p.i. Warp: Seine cotton Weft: Wool, 20/2 perle cotton Finished size -- width: 18" height: 17 5/8"	Framed: 24" 23 7/8"
<u>Venice</u>	Sett: 12 e.p.i. Warp: Seine cotton Weft: Wool, 20/2 perle cotton Finished size -- width: 12" height: 18 1/4"	Framed: 17 3/4" 24 5/8"
<u>Paris</u>	Sett: 12 e.p.i. Warp: Seine cotton Weft: Wool Finished size -- width: 17 1/4" height: 19 1/2"	Framed: 25 1/8" 28 1/4"

## CONCLUSION

Of practical concern was the creation of suitable images to carry out the objectives of the thesis, and the development of techniques to bring about their realization. More intangibly, it was hoped that they would present an approach different from most tapestry seen today, yet at the same time retain a link with the past.

As a body of work there is definitely an unpredicted individuality and originality in the style of the works. The choice of subject has provoked gratifying interest and numerous reactions to this play on yarns (if not on words). Most important, they do seem to carry an underlying reference to the elegance and character of the early courtly tapestries that have been such an influence.

There were times when the validity of the project was questioned by the weaver, but admittedly this was in the uncertain beginning, with the obstacles still to be surmounted. The confidence and mastery gained while weaving at the tapestry loom for many months have only served to reinforce the lure of tapestry as an art form, given many insights as to its endurance throughout an extensive history, and provided inspiration for future works.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Pierre Verlet et al., The Book of Tapestry (New York: The Vendome Press, 1978), p. 32.

<sup>2</sup>Margaret B. Freeman, The Unicorn Tapestries (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1976), p. 208.

<sup>3</sup>Verlet, The Book of Tapestry, pp. 62-3.

<sup>4</sup>Maurice Pianzola and Julien Coffinet, Tapestry (Geneva: Les Editions de Bonvent, 1971), pp. 110-111.

<sup>5</sup>Barbara Bertram, A History of Tapestry (McIntyre Visual Publications, 1975), p. 3.

<sup>6</sup>Laya Brostoff, Weaving a Tapestry (Loveland, CO: Interweave Press, 1982), p. 2.

<sup>7</sup>Anni Albers, On Designing (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), p. 51.

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## AFTERWORD

But most important to one's own growth is to see oneself leave the safe ground of accepted conventions and to find oneself alone and self-dependent. It is an adventure which can permeate one's whole being. Self-confidence can grow. And a longing for excitement can be satisfied without external means, within oneself; for creating is the most intense excitement one can come to know.

Anni Albers<sup>7</sup>

Thesis Proposal for the Master of Fine Arts Degree

College of Fine and Applied Arts  
Rochester Institute of Technology

Title: Tapestries in Transition

Submitted by: Dana Berendt Loud

Thesis Committee:

Chief Advisers: 1. Donald Bujnowski *Donald Bujnowski 10/5/83*  
2. Max Lenderman *Max L. Lenderman 10/5/83*

Departmental Approval:

Date:

*10/10/83*

Approval, Assistant to the Dean for Graduate Affairs:

Date:

Final Committee Decision:

Date:

In this thesis I intend to produce a series of tapestries using the upright tapestry loom and/or the multi-harness loom. The work will be the result of research into specific tapestry traditions. Through various transitions and adaptations both in design and color, I will proceed to use these traditions in a unique and fresh manner.