

In the Woof and Warp of Miniatures, Interlocking Metaphors and Journeys

By KATHRYN SHATTUCK

In a courtyard studio in the Latin Quarter of Paris, lined with skeins and spools in brilliant colors, Sheila Hicks has created monumental textile art like "May I Have This Dance?," a 20-by-60-foot spiraling linen-and-cork fantasy, and "Four Seasons of Mount Fuji," a rainbow-ribbon tapestry the length of a football field.

But for 50 years, on a handmade wooden frame that she carries around the world in her bag, Ms. Hicks has also devised art of a more intimate sort: weavings the size and shape of a piece of notebook paper, give or take a couple of inches and a straight line here and there.

Some 200 of these miniatures are displayed in "Sheila Hicks: Weaving as Metaphor" at the Bard Graduate Center on West 86th Street in Manhattan (through Oct. 15). The center's first solo exhibition devoted to a contemporary artist, the show also brings together Ms. Hicks's small works for the first time. (She will discuss her collaboration with the Mexican architect Ricardo Legorreta on Sept. 14 at the Americas Society, 680 Park Avenue, at 68th Street.)

"I found my voice and my footing in my small work," Ms. Hicks told Monique Lévi-Strauss in 2004, in an interview for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. "It enabled me to build bridges between art, design, architecture and decorative arts."

That thought serves as a sort of mission statement for "Weaving as Metaphor," in which variations on a fiber theme — anything from wool and silk to cellophane noodles, paper yarn and rubber bands — line the third-floor gallery walls. Some, like the monochromatic "Muro Blanco" (1960), from her early years in Mexico, are deceptively simple, suggestive of Braille manuscripts written in handspun wool. Others, like "Tibidabo Daydream" (1973), produced in Europe and India in the 60's and 70's, pulse with color and movement.

"Papillon," begun in 1997 on an excursion to Japan and finished two years ago in France, is a delicate assemblage of color transfer paper and synthetic warp, giving an effect of wings captured between piano strings.



Ed Alcock for The New York Times

The fiber artist Sheila Hicks, in her studio in the Latin Quarter of Paris.

And then there are her most recent creations: froths of midnight-blue milliner's netting, tangles of shimmering threads, delicate beads of pearly cotton and silk, strung on barely perceptible filament, that hang in the air like the northern lights.

"Sheila was part of the textile revolution of the 1960's," said Nina Stritzler-Levine, the center's director of exhibitions and the show's curator. "She, along with other fiber

Webs from wool and silk, cellophane noodles, paper yarn and rubber bands.

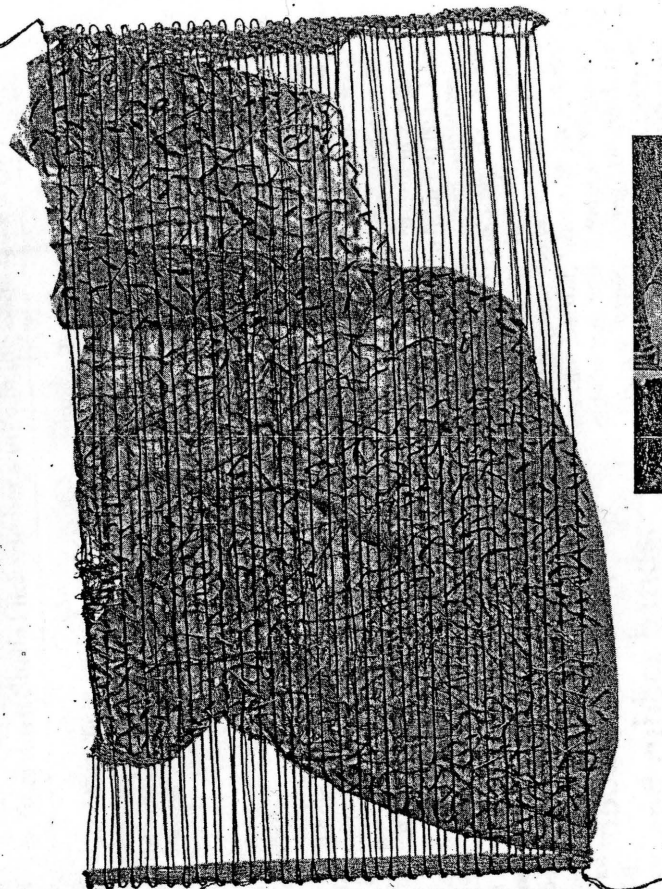
artists, is really responsible for taking textiles off the wall and giving them a sculptural dimension. I was very interested in the way in which the hand and craft informs the design process in her smaller works. I think they illuminate her desire for the superb skill she has as a weaver but also highlight this subversion in her technique."

"When I started to go through my own archives and the Knoll archives," Ms. Stritzler-Levine continued, referring to the furniture company where Ms. Hicks once worked "I realized that on this small loom she worked out these very large design ideas."

In a phone interview from Paris, her home along with New York for the last 40 years, Ms. Hicks, 72, said, "I've always done the small ones as a way of talking to myself and exploring, of entertaining myself in a way."

Her voice, with a faint Parisian lilt, belies her Midwestern childhood: first on the Nebraska prairie, where she learned needlework from her spinster great-aunts, and then in cities like Detroit, where as an 8-year-old she ran with a gang of Yugoslav children before being rescued by classes at the Art Institute of Detroit. Later in Chicago she decided that art might become her calling.

After two years at Syracuse University, which she says she chose for its Greek name and what she believed was its proximity to Manhattan, Ms. Hicks and a fellow art student applied to Yale. Both were accepted, but then her friend committed suicide. Ms. Hicks decided to attend on her own. Her first stop, she recalled, was an Army surplus store,



Above, Cooper Hewitt, National Design Museum

where she bought men's clothing so as not to stand out from the male students.

She studied painting under the Bauhaus professor Josef Albers, but when a pre-Columbian textile course captured her attention, he took her home to meet his wife, Anni, a noted weaver. At his suggestion, she applied for a Fulbright scholarship to South America and spent the first few years of her weaving life journeying through Venezuela, Bolivia, Peru and Chile, and back north to Mexico.

While learning her art alongside local craftspeople and improvising on their techniques to suit her purpose, she painted and took photographs to support herself and became mesmerized by architecture and how her soft art could complement it. She married in Mexico and had a daughter; in the 1960's she moved to France, where she remarried and had a son.

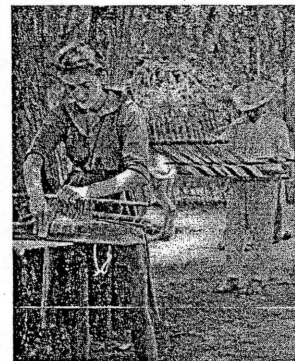
In 1964, with young children and her art to support, Ms. Hicks im-

mersed herself in corporate work. At Knoll she designed upholstery fabrics inspired by her work in Mexico and the Andes. She also worked for Commonwealth Trust, a weaving company in Kozhikode, India. In the meantime she established her own studio in Paris, where she did commissioned work and her personal projects.

"Early in the morning I look at materials; that's how I start my day," Ms. Hicks said, as her grandchildren's pet birds chattered in the background. "When light appears, I start thinking as I'm about to open my eyes. I have visions based on any one of a number of inexplicable phenomena. I have these soaring visions, too, which is why I make such big things."

And always she is looking, analyzing, searching.

"The thing that really draws me to Sheila is her inexhaustible creativity within a creative medium: thread and fiber," said Mildred Constantine, a former curator at the Museum of



Faith Stern

Left, "Papillon," a work by Ms. Hicks inspired by a trip to Japan; above, Ms. Hicks in Mexico with a back-strap loom, a simple device that extends from a tree or a hook to the belt of a weaver, who leans backward to straighten and give tension to the yarns.

Modern Art, who added Ms. Hicks's "White Letter" to the permanent collection in 1963. "She's one of the most well-traveled artists I've ever met, and one of the most innovative."

Most recently Ms. Hicks has been inspired by Ouessant, an island off the Breton coast of France, where she had spied treacherous rock outcroppings from the window of the tiny plane that took her there and back. She had just returned with bags full of mouse-gnawed linen thread, retrieved from some local weavers, and was now pondering how to use it.

If her plan didn't work out, she noted, she could always unravel it, something she has done to her creations time and again.

"The act of creating is much more exciting for me than leaving a monument to myself," she said, explaining how she would deconstruct her fiber twists and spirals and ponytails and tapestries into piles of yarn. "It felt great. It meant that my imagination could run free."