

Found in Translation: The Life and Art of Helena Hernmarck

by Lawrence Knowles

The expatriate's experience of living in a second language can produce a unique double perspective on the world, creating a sort of personal triangulation that distances a person from language itself and allows the occasional flash of direct apprehension unmediated by words. As stimulating as living in translation may be, much more than meaning can be lost in the gaps between languages. The expatriate's work and identity, formed and defined in the language of her homeland, may be vague, confusing, or inexpressible in a second language.

Take the case of Helena Hernmarck, a Swedish native who has spent almost four decades in English-speaking countries, nearly 25 years in the United States. Hernmarck has made quite a name for herself. Her work is found in prestigious museums and private collections and, most famously, adorns walls designed by America's leading architects, walls

that house some of the titans of American commerce and industry.

But what exactly is the name she has made for herself?

Hernmarck confronted the question of identifying labels in both her first and second languages for a 1999 retrospective exhibit and a book she produced to accompany it. The book—a handsome volume featuring essays by Monica Boman and Patricia Malarcher along with abundant, high-quality illustrations of Hernmarck's work—was first published in Sweden under the title *Helena Hernmarck - textilkonstnär*. A "textilkonstnär" is someone who deals with both decorative and functional fabrics, their design and production. The term signifies a high quality of trained artistry and artisanship. It is the job description Hernmarck earned from her Swedish university training and it best defines her sense of professional identity. It has no English equivalent. A literal translation

Below: Photo of Helena Hernmarck in her Connecticut studio by Andrew de Lory.

Opposite: Chicago Skyline (and detail), 1997; plain weave, discontinuous supplementary weft patterning, treadled weft-float twill; wool, linen, cotton; 10 feet 9 inches by 13 feet 6 inches. Collection of Metropolitan Pier & Exposition Authority, Chicago, Illinois. Photo: Bob Schimer.





of *textilkonstnär* might be something like textile artist, but that is a vague, ad hoc label carrying none of the cultural connotations of the Swedish word. Hernmarck chose the term “tapestry artist” for the English title to her book.

Not all English speakers accept Hernmarck’s use of the label “tapestry,” as she learned a few years ago at an international tapestry conference in Australia. Some participants defined tapestry in terms of French Gobelin technique—a weft-faced weave with discontinuous weft—and objected to Hernmarck’s use of the word to describe her work. The warp shows in Hernmarck’s tapestries, sometimes quite a lot of it; she does all sorts of things with floats and treadle-controlled weave structures; and sometimes the weft goes all the way from one selvedge to the other! This is not Gobelin technique and for some English speakers cannot be tapestry.

The Swedish term that describes Hernmarck’s work is *bildvävnader*, which translates literally as “wall picture weaving.” Purists’ objections notwithstanding, Hernmarck is content to use tapestry as a translation of *bildvävnader*, and she has found that most ordinary English speakers are not that concerned about whether her warp shows and readily accept her “wall picture weavings” as tapestries.

For almost three decades, Hernmarck has enjoyed astonishing success making large *bildvävnader* for prominent commercial and corporate spaces. Her clients understand perfectly well what Hernmarck makes: beautiful fiber works that enrich and enhance the human experience of their buildings. She produces her work on time and on budget and works well in the collaborative process necessary to make commercial architecture a success.

Hernmarck believes the days of big corporate commissions are now behind her, however. More than just a downturn in the building cycle, Hernmarck sees a fundamental change in corporate attitudes towards buildings and office space. “Corporations don’t identify with the buildings anymore. They shift around and cast off parts of themselves as they become conglomerates. Everything is much more fluid. And with everyone out in cyberspace, who cares what hangs in the lobbies?”

Hernmarck recalls one of her earliest and most important commissions, *Rainforest*, for the executive offices of the Weyerhaeuser Company in Seattle, Washington. Weyerhaeuser provided its corporate helicopter to take Hernmarck from her hotel into the Washington rainforest in search of design ideas. The company’s chief executive officer met with her to discuss the tapestry and what it meant for the company. That was in 1971. “The CEOs don’t have time anymore to get involved with refinements like artistic expression.”

In place of corporate clients Hernmarck is looking to develop new markets for her work.



That has meant shifting to a smaller, more domestic scale for her tapestries. The title of Hernmarck's 1999 exhibit, "Monumental and Intimate," signals this change. Monumental, of course, refers to the corporate commissions, measuring up to 400 square feet. The Museum of the Fashion Institute of Technology, for example, devoted a cavernous gallery to these pieces and constructed a room-dividing diagonal wall to accommodate one 47-foot-long tapestry. The samples of Hernmarck's large tapestries (and it was only a small sampling of her total output) demonstrated the qualities that have made her so successful. Hernmarck's tapestries balance bold, dynamic energy and soft, contemplative serenity. They are immediately comprehensible and make a terrific first impression but also contain sufficient variety and complexity to reward prolonged and repeated viewing. The tapestries are transformed by distance, becoming entirely different works depending on the viewer's proximity, but engaging and satisfying from near or far.

Hernmarck may do herself an injustice by labeling her work "tapestry." I say this as someone who weaves Gobelin tapestry and has spent years learning the French tradition and techniques. But Hernmarck's weavings are better than Gobelin tapestry, certainly for large-scale, monumental, architectural installations. Hernmarck's varied weave structure makes for a more interesting surface than Gobelin tapestry; it allows a richer, more

vibrant blend of color. Gobelin technique is particularly strong in shape building and in definition of form and line. Hernmarck uses only texture, color, and value contrast to establish line in her work, and yet the definition is always clear and vital.

It is partly because her technique does not establish hard lines that Hernmarck's work reads so well at any viewing distance. While many Gobelin tapestry makers now blend color in the weft bobbin, as Hernmarck does, the effect cannot approach the multilayered intensity Hernmarck achieves by simultaneously manipulating color in the weft, the warp, and the weave structure. Hernmarck says she strives to make her colors look "wet," and that is an apt description of the distinction between Hernmarck's most successful tapestries and the flat, arid colors of many Gobelin weavings.

For all the energy and excitement generated by a room full of Hernmarck's large tapestries, the Fashion Institute of Technology gallery stirred an uneasy sense of dislocation. As Patricia Malarcher argues in her thoughtful essay for the *Helena Hernmarck* book, Hernmarck's "works seem inevitable, as if their removal would diminish themselves as well as the spaces they inhabit." Indeed, seeing these tapestries hanging in a neutral, alien gallery felt a bit like observing animals at a zoo. While it is thrilling to see such wonderful creatures, one is always aware that they belong some-

Above: Italian Postage, 1990; plain weave, discontinuous supplementary weft patterning; wool, linen, cotton; 4 feet 2 inches by 6 feet 8 inches. Collection of Thomas and Rosemary Fitzsimons. Photo: Henry Wolf.

Opposite, top: Geranium (detail), 1995; plain weave, discontinuous supplementary weft patterning, treadled weftfloat twill; wool, linen, cotton; 4 feet 2 inches by 8 feet. Collection of Robert H. Sweet. Photo: Norman McGrath

Opposite, bottom: Poppies (detail), 1978; plain weave, discontinuous supplementary weft patterning, treadled weftfloat twill; wool, linen, cotton, gold metallic Mylar; 11 by 20 feet. Collection of Crow Art Partnership, Dallas, Texas. Photo: James F. Wilson.





**"CORPORATIONS DON'T IDENTIFY
WITH THE BUILDINGS ANYMORE,
AS THEY BECOME CONGLOMER-
ATES. THE CEOS DON'T HAVE
TIME TO GET INVOLVED WITH
REFINEMENTS LIKE ARTISTIC
EXPRESSION."**

where else and are rightly appreciated only in their proper environment. Fortunately, the book contains many excellent photos of Hernmarck's commissions *in situ*, which capture something of their native qualities.

A second and smaller gallery at FIT was devoted to the intimate side of Hernmarck's work. While the large commissioned tapestries seemed to yearn for the settings they were designed for, Hernmarck's smaller weavings were content to stand on their own and gave a sense of being whole, self-fulfilled. They are generally less dynamic, waiting for a viewer who is ready to relax and spend time with them, rather than aggressively seeking to catch the eye of fleeting passersby.

Shifting gears from corporate commissions to smaller, speculative, personal works is full of both artistic and business challenges. The commission process provided a constant drive of deadlines and constraints—a unique space and the often idiosyncratic requirements of architect and client. Hernmarck thrived on the pressure. "You need something to struggle against. You can't just be out there with no resistance."

Now that Hernmarck can weave whatever she wants, what does she want to weave?



History of Money, 1997; plain weave, discontinuous supplementary weft patterning; wool, linen, cotton; 6 by 16 feet. Collection of First USA Bank, Wilmington, Delaware. Photo: Terence Roberts.

Hernmarck recalls her father warning her of the dangers of doing nothing but commission work, asking "When are you going to have a chance to renew your sources, your self?"

Hernmarck does not appear to be wanting for ideas. She has long nurtured a fascination with paper and letters, and these have provided a rich vein to explore, resulting in works abstracted from the textures and value contrasts of folded paper as well as realistic depictions of envelopes, stamps, and postmarks. Hernmarck turned the tedium of traffic, staring at the backsides of innumerable trucks while on a bus tour in Italy, into a source for designs. She photographed the trucks and composed the elements into tapestry designs.

While enjoying the opportunity to explore and experiment with design and materials, Hernmarck is keenly aware of the need to find new markets that will generate the sales necessary to support her work. That is partly why she organized the exhibit and book, as marketing and promotion tools. As a businessperson, she seems skeptical of her chances for success. "Commissions are the only way to make money. You can't make money with a gallery because they double the price. I have to cut

my price almost to cost for the gallery's price to be reasonable."

Hernmarck bristles at the impression some people have of her as a successful businessperson first and only secondarily a successful artist. "The business side is only there to support the art, to make it possible for me to weave." It may be another instance of a translation problem. Hernmarck does not see herself as limited to a choice between the noble penury of pure "art" and the mercenary market orientation of "craft." The Swedish language offers an alternative between art and craft, called *konsthandverk*. The term might be roughly translated as "artistic crafts," though no word or term in English adequately resolves the tension between these two poles. It is in that realm that Hernmarck feels at home and comfortable.

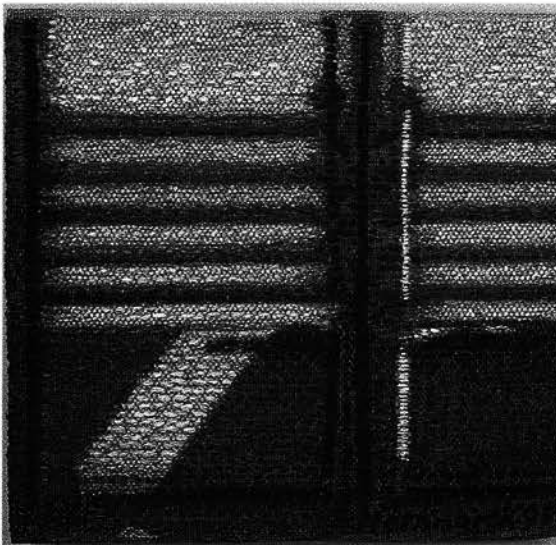
There is scant comfort to be found in English in that middle realm between art and craft, no term or descriptive label that can resolve the tensions that simultaneously draw and repel a person between those two poles.

In her biographical essay for the *Helena Hernmarck* book, Monica Boman describes the 16-year-old Hernmarck's visit to a small crafts village in Hytting, Sweden, centered on the

weaving studio of Alice Lund. It was this visit, the gentle ambience of the village, the beautiful homes and studios, the "concentration and silence, the beating of the looms, the luster of the wool, the sheen of the linen" that first gave Hernmarck the idea that she would like to be a weaver. Boman quotes Hernmarck telling herself at the time, "This is how I'd like to live."

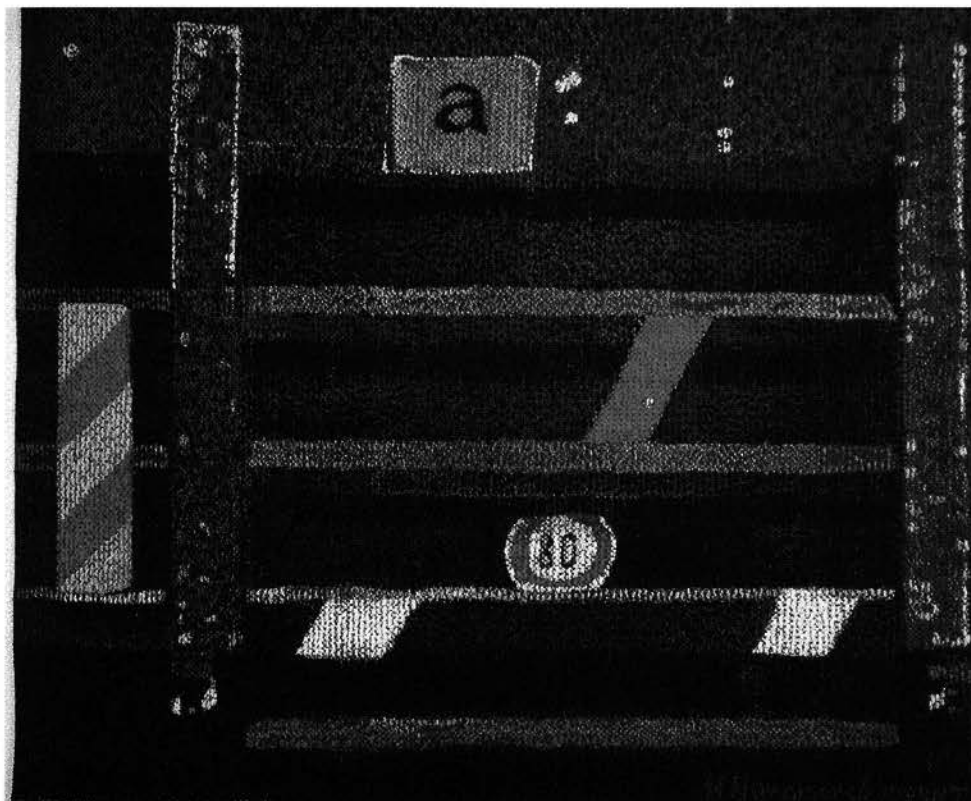
It is a telling phrase that may contain the key to understanding Hernmarck's achievements and aspirations. Hernmarck describes herself as a practical-minded person and that no doubt helps explain her singular achievement, sustaining herself for almost three decades making tapestries. She has remarkable aesthetic judgement, a sophisticated eye for color, and an easy gift for invention and design. She understands, at a very practical level, that art is about life. It is about finding ways to live a fulfilling life, weaving and designing, being a *textilkonstnär* making *bildvävnader*. To do that, she recognizes that she needs to make her work a part of other people's lives, to meet them where they live rather than expecting that people will adapt to her and her work. Perhaps because of her long experience mediating and translating between two languages and cultures, Hernmarck has proven to be uncannily adept at creating art that instills vitality in her own life and the lives of others.

Lawrence Knowles writes about tapestry and other subjects from his home near Boston, Massachusetts.



Helena Hernmarck: Tapestry Artist, 1999, published by Byggförlaget • Kultur, Stockholm, Sweden, distributed in the United States and Canada by the University of Washington Press, Seattle.

"Monumental and Intimate: Tapestries by Helena Hernmarck" was on view at the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, New York, New York, June 22 through August 28, 1999, and at Prince Eugen's Waldemarsudde, Stockholm, Sweden, October 2 through December 5, 1999.



Left: Quo Vadis, 1998; plain weave, discontinuous basket weave, discontinuous supplementary weft patterning; wool, linen, cotton; 7 feet 2 inches by 8 feet 2 inches. Photo: Sally Andersen Bruce.

Above: Blue Truck, 1999; plain weave, discontinuous supplementary weft patterning; wool, linen, cotton; 30 by 31 inches. Photo: Helena Hernmarck.

All photos are courtesy of Helena Hernmarck.