



Hernmarck works at her eight-foot loom while the author assists at the wool table in Hernmarck's Ridgefield, Connecticut, studio. Photograph by Ross Mantle.



# A Weaver's Logic: Inside the Archive of Helena Hernmarck

by Mae Colburn

At a monumental 14 feet high by 30 feet wide, Helena Hernmarck's wool wall reflects the breadth of her more than fifty-year career as a tapestry artist. It also reflects her logic and the organizational principles that allow her to retain command of the vast amounts of material and information that underlie her impressive production.

Hernmarck estimates that her wool wall contains more than two thousand colors and some three thousand pounds of wool. It is organized by color rather than thickness or ply. Rectangular bins filled with yellow skeins on the left give way to reds, purples, blues, greens, and neutrals on the right. Dark skeins are kept near the bottom, and light skeins near the top. Mixed colors are stacked in the hard-to-reach area above the ladder. Like all of her organizational schema, this arrangement is felt rather than calculated. It is a practical extension of her weaving technique, which involves combining dozens of strands of yarn



**ABOVE:** Hernmarck tapes together two sections of her 44-foot long timeline where she records life events alongside tapestries woven.



**ABOVE:** Hernmarck lays out her 44-foot long timeline alongside the wool wall. It extends the length of the entire wool wall and continues around the corner.

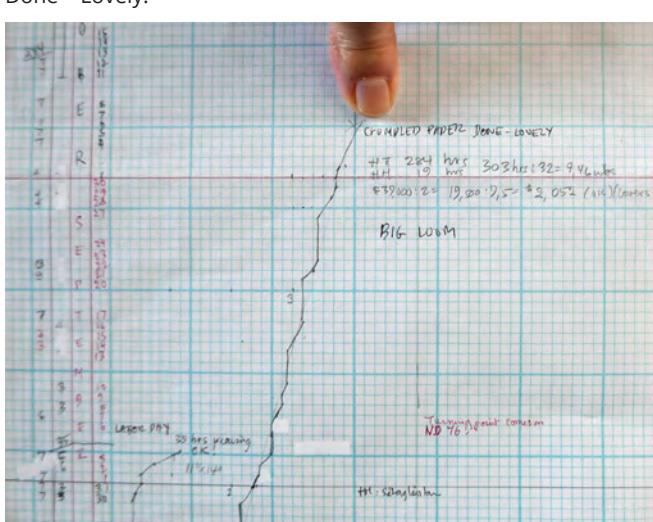
in different weights, colors, and textures into butterflies to create a desired visual effect, and doing so quickly, without hesitation. Color mixtures can be revised in the next weft row.

If color is the major organizing principle in Hernmarck's studio, time is the major principle in her archive. Like the wool wall, time is conceived as a grid.

On graph paper, cut into 2 inch by 12 inch strips taped together lengthwise, Hernmarck records life events alongside tapestries woven, all of which take months, if not years, to conceive and complete. This chart, started in 1976 when Hernmarck was 35, now stretches 44 feet long. Taken out of its file drawer and unfolded, it extends the entire length of the wool wall and continues around the corner.

Hernmarck's technique differs from traditional tapestry weave in that it accumulates row-by-row on a floor loom, tamped down with a beater, rather than woven in mosaic-like sections and tamped down with a handheld fork. This allows progress to be measured chronologically, as inches through time.

Her individual tapestry charts reflect this. A diagonal line moves steadily upward and to the right across an x and a y axis. X represents inches, and y represents time. Hernmarck plots her projected schedule and measures it against the actual course. She also notes hours worked, assistants, challenges that arise, and major events that inform or intervene in the weaving. A chart like this exists for every tapestry, complete with a calculation of total hours and the title and reference number written on the back.



These reference numbers, assigned chronologically, form the spine of Hernmarck's business archive, and she can summon them as quickly as she can a date and a title. They determine the organization of photos, correspondence, newspaper clippings, magazine articles, and more in the records she keeps on each tapestry.

Chronological time is less intrinsic to Hernmarck's design archive on the third floor of her studio. Completed tapestry designs are sorted according to reference number, but the photocopies, photographs, scraps of painted paper, and other ephemera that go into making them are sorted thematically, or preferentially, if they are sorted at all. Happenstance is paramount in Hernmarck's design work. Random encounters of colors, textures, and materials inspire her, as do their tendencies to hide, morph, and resurface through time.

For her 2004 tapestry, *Crumpled Paper*, Hernmarck crumpled a piece of Chinese joss paper to look like a flower, then photographed it. The sheet, with the imprint of the original crinkles, resides in her archive alongside several iterations of the design. One has a lighter background and the other a darker background. A third is a numbered enlargement of the second. All three include the same photograph of the joss paper with its peaks and valleys. Photography is central to Hernmarck's design work; it allows her to capture shadows, one of the most challenging and exciting phenomena to weave.

This photograph of crumpled paper resurfaced in 2016 when Hernmarck first learned about her commission for Hudson Yards. Asked to design for a horizontal space, she cut the image in two, enlarged it, and rotated it to create a continuous contour from left to right. The design lay dormant for several years as the scope and location of the Hudson Yards commission changed (resulting instead in the equally magnificent *Flowers* and *Maple Tree* tapestries), but came up again recently as a possible centerpiece for an upcoming exhibition. Although still in discussion, the tapestry would be titled *Crumpled Color Paper*, and woven 4 feet high by 10 feet wide by the professional weavers at Alice Lund Textilier, an eighty-year-old firm in Borlänge, Sweden.

Hernmarck herself was an apprentice at Alice Lund Textilier in 1960-1961, and she has collaborated with the firm on 26 tapestries to date. These connections bring Hernmarck immense personal satisfaction: the connection to the weavers, to the spinners, to the farmers who raise the *rya* sheep whose wool she works with. Because of this collaborative effort, (the result of immense trust and coordination, well-documented in her correspondence archive), Hernmarck's tapestries now number more than 270, 115 produced on commission.

Hernmarck maintains two large binders in her office labeled "Last Word." These binders include correspondence about each of her commissioned works: the names and numbers of building managers, exchanges about cleaning and insurance values, notes from people who have gone to visit a tapestry and reported back. The binders are an acknowledgement of change over time. As tapestries go up, they also come down as buildings are remodeled or companies change hands.

The full scope of Hernmarck's archive comes into play when this happens. Appraisers need financial records. Conservators need technical details. Curators need contextual documentation. Everybody needs to see photographs.



**ABOVE:** Helena Hernmarck, *Crumpled Paper*, 2004. Wool, linen, cotton. 56 x 58 inches. Private Collection.



**ABOVE:** Design materials for *Crumpled Paper*, 2004. On the left and center are several versions of the design. On the right is the original sheet of joss paper, which Hernmarck crumpled to look like a flower.



#### Endnotes:

Hernmarck's archive is jointly held by Helena Hernmarck Tapestries in Ridgefield, Connecticut, and the University of Minnesota's Northwest Architectural Archives in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where papers related to the first three decades of her career have been catalogued and are available to researchers.

Hernmarck's tapestries are held in museum collections, public buildings, and corporate settings across the U.S., Canada, Scandinavia, and select other locations around the world. The work of locating, documenting, and maintaining her tapestries is ongoing between Hernmarck, the author, and a network of friends and associates.

If you are interested in visiting a tapestry near you or have a contribution to make to the "Last Word" file, please contact: [studio@hernmarck.com](mailto:studio@hernmarck.com).

For more information about Helena Hernmarck, visit: [hernmarck.com](http://hernmarck.com).

ABOVE: The design for *Crumpled Color Paper*, a tapestry that Hernmarck is considering producing in collaboration with Alice Lund Textilier in Borlänge, Sweden.

When successful, this group of people can find the tapestry a new home, or a place in a museum collection, or a path back to Hernmarck's personal collection. Most important to Hernmarck is that her tapestries continue enhancing the lives of people who live and work around them, and inspiring those who weave to continue weaving, to keep the skills alive. If there is an overarching logic to Hernmarck's archive, this is it.

*Mae Colburn is a New York-based writer, researcher, and educator with a focus on handweaving in contemporary life. She has worked alongside Helena Hernmarck since 2015, both as studio assistant and as archivist documenting Hernmarck's more than fifty-year career. [maecolburn.info](http://maecolburn.info)*

Photography provided by the author unless otherwise indicated.

**PLY**  
THE MAGAZINE FOR HANDSPINNERS

smart & beautiful

digital and print subscriptions

plymagazine.com

selvedge THE FABRIC OF YOUR LIFE

MAKE OUR STORIES PART OF YOUR STORY

SELVEDGE IS PUBLISHED 6 TIMES A YEAR

10% OFF STANDARD SUBSCRIPTIONS WITH CODE HGA\*

\*The offer does not include recurring subscriptions which are already discounted.

WWW.SELVEDGE.ORG