
Helena Hernmarck: Weaver of Contrasts

By Nicole LaBouff



The Swedish-born artist and weaver Helena Hernmarck is one of the most successful figures in the world of contemporary tapestry. She can look back on a career that spans six decades, with production sites in the United States and Sweden, and shows no signs of stopping.

Helena Hernmarck (above) and on the opposite page cutting loose yarn from the back of her 1992 tapestry *Springtime*, measuring 154 by 84 inches. It was commissioned by C&S Sovran Bank, Atlanta, Georgia.

PHOTO: BRIAN GASSEL



HERNMARCK'S BEGINNINGS WERE not auspicious. As a small child, after her report card came back with scores lower than those of her three siblings, her father, Carl Hernmarck, told Helena: "You can always do something with your hands." The comment clearly registered. Helena Hernmarck has spent a lifetime working with her hands, making large-scale tapestries—an oeuvre that currently stands at 274—one warp and weft at a time.

Though her father's comment might sound patronizing, it was a genuine form of consolation in a family that fostered a rich appreciation for the manual arts and design. Carl Hernmarck was a museum curator with expertise in Swedish and European historic decorative arts and silverwork. In 1946, when Helena was five, he was appointed head of the decorative arts department at Sweden's National Museum of Fine Arts. Helena's uncle was the noted functionalist architect and urban planner, Sven Markelius. The modern 1945 "system house"—so-called for its use of prefabricated elements that could be configured in multiple ways—which he built and lived in was featured in design magazines and came to be regarded as emblematic of Swedish postwar architecture. Helena spent much of her childhood with her uncle and his family at their home in Kevinge. Though Hernmarck emigrated from Sweden in 1964, and has called Canada, England and the U.S. "home" throughout most of her professional life, her foundations in Swedish art and design, both modern and historic, have guided her artistic path in lasting and sometimes surprising ways.

Hernmarck built her career on designing large-scale tapestries for public, often corporate, buildings, and she found success in this niche very early on, working closely not only with CEO clients but primarily with architects and designers. She attributes to her childhood days in the Markelius household and the conversations overheard there for introducing her to the world of the architect and industrial designer. That



This tapestry, entitled *Rainforest*, was woven in 1972 for the Weyerhaeuser Company in Seattle, Washington. It is 110 inches high and 168 inches wide.



exposure gave her a shared vocabulary—for aesthetic sensibilities as well as for the fiscal dimensions of big-budget projects—that later helped her interact with her clients as an industry insider. She also credits much of her success as a weaver to Edna Martin, her professor at the University College of Arts, Crafts and Design in her native Stockholm. As for networking and marketing, the textile designer Astrid Sampe was an important role model. Hernmarck also drew important lessons in weaving and professionalization from the highly regarded weaver and textile designer Alice Lund, with whom Hernmarck apprenticed for two summers in Hytting during her college years. Both Lund and Sampe collaborated with architects to create entire suites of furnishing textiles.

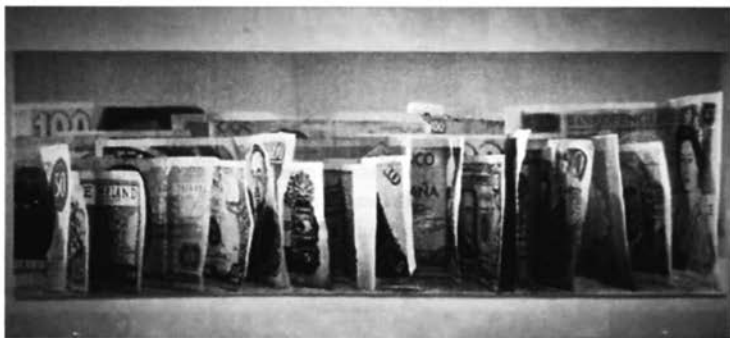
Immediately after graduating in 1963, Hernmarck knew two things: she wanted to make big tapestries, and—given that large hand-woven textiles were expensive and required extensive wall space for display—she would need to cultivate personal connections with architects. She moved

PHOTO COURTESY OF WEYERHAEUSER

| *She gravitated to ephemeral matter and fleeting imagery, new subjects for tapestry.*

to Montreal in 1964, and in 1967 took the first of two extended road trips across Canada and the U.S., making pitches to the biggest names in corporate architecture. Her first notable American commission came from the lumber firm Weyerhaeuser with orders for two large tapestries. When her *Rainforest* tapestry was newly installed at the Weyerhaeuser headquarters and featured on the cover of *Interiors* in 1971, she won instant worldwide name recognition. Two years later, when she met her would-be husband, the American industrial designer Niels Diffrient, he immediately made the connection: "Oh you're the one who did the *Rainforest* tapestry!" The couple ultimately settled in Connecticut, where Hernmarck still works and resides. Following Weyerhaeuser, orders came in from Bethlehem Steel, John Hancock Mutual Life Insurance, the Boston Federal Reserve Bank, Kellogg's, Pepsi, Time Warner, and the list goes on.

AS BIG COMMISSIONS STARTED ROLLING IN DURING THOSE early years in Montreal, Hernmarck hired assistant weavers, a practice she maintains for large projects. They blared rock music in her studio: "It helped us weave faster!" she reasons. But rebellious streaks also started to emerge in Hernmarck's artistic sensibilities. She experimented with a stark palette of black and white. She gravitated to ephemeral matter and fleeting imagery, new subjects for tapestry: newspaper pages, snapshots, spring blossoms, torn tickets, letters received. She liked the contrast between message and medium, rendering transient images with the time- and labor-intensive work of weaving by hand. Her imagery also became more realistic as she embraced the Pop Art movement around her and drifted away from the



Currency: The feeling of depth in a woven tapestry is striking in this 1992 work, commissioned by C&S Sovran Bank, Atlanta, Georgia, measuring 114 by 342 inches.

PHOTO: BRIAN GASSEL



Blue Wash II was woven for Pitney Bowes headquarters in Stamford, Connecticut, in 1984. It is 40 feet long and 11 feet wide.

Bauhaus abstract aesthetic her teachers had promoted in Stockholm. The clarity with which she can convey her imagery becomes all the more remarkable when, upon closer inspection, warps and wefts dissolve into a mass of multicolored dots as in a pointillist painting. Photorealistic weaving remains one of Hernmarck's trademarks.

It would be easy to cast Hernmarck as a renegade artist-weaver that made a radical break with her past and never looked back. The story might go: Swedish weaver moves to North America, embraces Pop Art, finds success with corporate clientele, lives happily ever after in Connecticut. But this story is only partially true, and to tell it is to misunderstand the artist and her art. Hernmarck never severed her ties with Sweden. In fact, her success as an artist has depended on the maintenance of those ties.

In 1975, Hernmarck found herself struggling to complete two commissions: the *Hancock Coat of Arms* for the John Hancock Tower in Boston and *Cloudscape* for the United States Automobile Association headquarters in San Antonio. To meet her promised deadlines (her reputation has always been backed by timely delivery) she asked the weavers at the Alice Lund Textiles studio, then under new leadership after Lund's retirement, to take over *Cloudscape*. They agreed. The collaboration proved so successful that Hernmarck partnered with Alice Lund Textiles on 22 more commissions; a new one is currently in the works. This 40-year relationship has been mutually beneficial, allowing Hernmarck to take on

PHOTO: NORMAN MCGRATH



Once in a Lifetime was woven in 2011 for Margaret A. Cargill Philanthropies, Eden Prairie, Minnesota. This design depicts a Kermode bear, or “spirit bear,” a protected species unique to the rain forest regions of western British Columbia. The work measures 12 by 10 feet. On the opposite page is a detail of the bear’s front paws, showing the intricate weaving.

PHOTO: HELENA HERNMARCK



increasingly ambitious projects, and sustaining Alice Lund Textiles as a company. It also transformed Hernmarck from a U.S.-based solo artist to the jet-setting head of a transatlantic production team.

The partnership with Alice Lund Textiles made sense, given that everyone shared a common practice grounded in traditional Swedish weaving. Hernmarck executed many of her early hangings in a variation on “rosengang” or rosepath, a centuries-old Scandinavian weave structure that Swedish weavers know well (Hernmarck calls her method “free rosepath”). Her recourse to this technique has made some (non-Scandinavian) textile purists question whether her creations should be called “tapestries” because they were not woven in the French Gobelins style. Textile scholars typically define tapestries as being composed of discontinuous weft threads that completely cover the warp. That is, small patches of yarn are packed down with a fork, creating a colorful surface. In contrast, Hernmarck’s tapestries contain discontinuous wefts and occasional continuous wefts, and a beater is used to pack down each completed row. Even though it differs from the Gobelins technique, the use of rosepath for large mural textiles is entirely in keeping with Swedish custom. The Swedish term for these textiles is “bildvävnad,” or image weavings, referring to the textile’s content without referring to a specific technique.

At the same time, Hernmarck’s technical innovations evolved as she introduced bundled wefts with variously hued yarns to her weavings and hand-manipulated brocaded elements that break out of gridded structures—both moves that had no known precedent in traditional tapestry weave or in rosepath. These innovations offer her greater freedom to interpret complex designs and impart a sense of depth and volume to two-dimensional imagery. For the manufacture of *Cloudscape*, Hernmarck shared her trade secrets with the Alice Lund weavers to ensure that a Hernmarck tapestry is a Hernmarck, regardless of whether it was woven in Sweden or the U.S. The training process took years and required sustained dialogue. Looking back on the decades-long partnership, Hernmarck concedes: “Now they can weave some of my designs in some way better than I can myself.”

THE YEAR 1975 WAS ALSO PIVOTAL IN TERMS OF MATERIALS, for it was at this time that Hernmarck committed to having all of her woolen yarns spun and dyed by the family-run firm, Wälstedts Textilverkstad AB, in Dala-Floda, Sweden, even going so far as to make annual trips to the firm so she could participate in the dyeing process. Lennart Wälstedt had established the operation in the 1920s during a period of renewed interest in Swedish folk textiles. The movement was led by a group of artists



Spring Tulips, woven in 2004, measures 120 by 187 inches.



Summer, woven in 2006, measures 120 by 187 inches.



Fall, woven in 2003, measures 120 by 187 inches.



ALL PHOTOS: ANDREW DE LORY

Winter, woven in 2005, measures 120 by 187 inches.

These four seasonal rotating tapestries were commissioned by The Related Companies to be hung

in the residential lobby of the Time Warner Center at Columbus Circle in New York City.



Helena Hernmarck shows her colorful collection of custom-made yarns in her imposing studio in Ridgefield, Connecticut.

and scholars who did more than study textiles—they also made them. And to make them properly, they sought Swedish rya wool for its unique textural qualities. But Swedish wool was hard to come by after the market was flooded by English imports in the 19th century and the demand for native stock went into steep decline. Lennart responded by buying up sheep scattered throughout the Dalarna region. Native Swedish sheep were already on the brink of extinction and mixed-breed animals were all he could find. Lennart spent years purifying his stock and improving the quality of its wool. Later, in the 1930s, his son Lars built the spinning machinery, which the family still uses.

An early client of the small Wälstedts factory was the noted Swedish artist-weaver Barbro Nilsson. Unlike most spinners, Wälstedts offered (and still does) artisans complete control over their materials: customers can order yarns in a range of qualities and diverse color options (all of the

dyeing is done in-house) and they can buy in large or small quantities. For Hernmarck, whose artistic expression depends on subtle variations in color and texture, Wälstedts yarns have been a crucial ingredient in her success. The historian in her (still her father's daughter) derives immense satisfaction from knowing her patronage helps keep a part of Swedish textile history alive. The family-owned Wälstedts firm is now on its fourth generation of master spinners. Hernmarck has worked with three of them and her multiple large orders have secured her position as the firm's top client. Virtually all of her tapestries utilize Wälstedts wool.

In 1984, two massive 40-foot-long Hernmarck tapestries were installed in the new Pitney Bowes corporate headquarters in Stamford, Connecticut. One was hung in the lobby and another in a towering four-story atrium. The tactile hangings gave the sleek walls a softer, second skin. At the time of

PHOTO: NORMAN McGRATH



Installation view of the *In Our Nature* solo exhibition in the Osher Gallery of the American Swedish Institute in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 2012. Shown are *Poppies* (1978), *Mossklyftan* (2007) and *Bluebonnets* (1979).

of manufacture, *Blue Wash I* and *Blue Wash II* were Hernmarck's largest tapestries to date. Even given that Hernmarck had at this point long been established as an artist-weaver who worked on a large scale, this was no easy feat. The *Blue Wash* diptych took a team of six full-time weavers (Hernmarck with two assistants in Connecticut, and two weavers at Alice Lund Textilier AB in Sweden) eight months to weave by hand. The hangings consumed over 250 pounds of Wälstedts yarn. *Blue Wash's* record-breaking size was later equaled in 2002 by Hernmarck's *Signals*, made for Pembroke Real Estate in Boston, Massachusetts, which comes in at 11 by 80 feet.

IN 2014, PITNEY BOWES GIFTED THE *BLUE WASH* TAPESTRIES TO the Minneapolis Institute of Art, the museum where I work. The museum has the distinction of holding the largest partial archive of Hernmarck's creations, currently ringing in at 34 tapestries along with other woven textiles. The newly acquired tapestries were each immediately divided in half to accommodate the museum's gallery walls (with Hernmarck's approval), an easy fix since the textiles were initially woven in two parts and joined by a seam. In April 2015, the reconfigured group of four 20-foot-long tapestries went up. As curators and crew watched the group move into its new home—an early 20th-century neoclassical building that was vastly different from the hangings' ultra-sleek site-specific origins—we did so with a sense of hesitation. But as the final tapestry was hung, we knew the tapestries had found an ideal residence. Their imagery of wet, dripping paint—a design based on original watercolor paintings Hernmarck did herself, in a sense a return to

PHOTO: NORMAN McGRATH



Posing in front of Hernmarck's *Passing Fall* tapestry from 2014 are the artist (second from right) and three women who produced it, Ebba Bergström, weaver, Frida Lindberg, owner of Alice Lund Textilier, and Tova Wibrandt, weaver. The work measures 5 feet 9 inches by 9 feet.

her foundations in abstract art—gestured to the fountain in the center of the gallery. Vertical swathes of white yarn running up and down throughout the tapestries mimicked the poses of nearby columns.

Hernmarck immediately shared the new installation photographs with the architect who designed the Pitney Bowes headquarters, Henry Cobb of IM Pei and Partners, and his business partner, Ted Musho. Musho replied: "What a delightful turn of events. They look absolutely compelling. We should thank the architect who created that space with columns that have no structural purpose except to wait for the cosmos to align a poetic event. It really exposes the truth that painting is more powerful than sculpture and architecture is a supporting actor." The closer you look at Hernmarck's big-ticket corporate commissions, the sooner their business-like façade falls away to reveal very personal and enduring connections between artists who regard one another as partners in the creation of designed environments. In much the same spirit, the appeal of Hernmarck's tapestries hinge on the union of contrasts: fleeting subject-matter rendered in a time-intensive and enduring format, contemporary design mingled with folk history, tradition countered by innovation.

PHOTO: LARS DAHLSTRÖM

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