



# TEXTILE ART

FORWARD MARCH

WHEN SKILLS COMBINE WITH REFLECTIVE AND ARTISTIC INSIGHT,  
SOMETHING WONDERFUL HAPPENS.  
AS DEMONSTRATED RECENTLY IN A POP-UP SHOW AND SYMPOSIUM  
HELD AT KONSTFACK.

FOR SOME, DEDICATING oneself to handweaving has meant not giving up on it. A few such founded the Swedish Weaving Academy almost two years ago. In partnership with Konstfack textiles programme, the Academy attracted some 180 textile artists and designers, textile theorists and conservators, researchers, functional weavers and textile students to an event held on the afternoon of April 4th at Konstfack in Stockholm. It was as if the audience had made a pilgrimage there to at last be able to consider the future of textile art in public spaces and contexts.

As evidence of the breadth and wealth of artistic textile expressions, approaches and craft techniques there was a show that afternoon in Konstfack's *Vita Havet* (White Sea) exhibition hall comprising work by some twenty textile artists. Apart from a group of older textile artists versed in craft skills at a masterly level, there is in Sweden also a new generation boldly and innovatively grasping technique and material. The whole sphere of textiles is enormous, encompassing everything from different kinds of spatiality, three-dimensional structures and two-dimensional surfaces to a host of different techniques, which symposium attendees could experience through a series of talks held during the afternoon.

The first speaker was Josefin Gäfvert, who trained at Friends of Handicraft and then graduated from Konstfack in 2016, now a member of the handweaving group *Studio Supersju*. What she gave herself as a task was to produce something that industry would never be able to do. But also to challenge certain finicky aspects, traditionally the hallmark of makers and craftspeople. Instead she explores what is actually going on in the weaving process and why exactitude is considered so important. The rugs she makes are like a kind of diary, with names such as *If I had words for missing*. Her weaves occupy space with tangible materiality and strong colour.

I see this as a sign of the times. Craft practitioners and artisans are pressing forward and vigorously so. Doing one's bit perfectly and meticulously away from general view will not suffice if handweaving is to survive. Textile art has to help itself.

The weave and embroidery studio at Friends of Handicraft (HV) has since 1874 served as a hub for preserving and developing expertise and realising artists' visions. Art embroiderer Kirsi Mattila, head of the embroidery studio, described the curtain executed lately by some of the HV co-workers for the UN skyscraper in New York, for the room where economic

and social issues are discussed. The artist Ann Edholm had been selected as the winner out of four invited artists.

HV's commissioners and collocutors are the artists. Cartoons are transformed into finished works by means of textile material and technique. In Ann Edholm's case, the technique used was appliqué: the sharp, narrow, spear-shaped triangles required perfect precision. The symposium audience was shown pictures of a HV co-worker sitting on the floor feeding cloth in to a sewing machine. There was no table large enough. A whole set of problems had to be solved, everything from the hang to USA's fire safety standards. A sample was tested for flammability in Texas.

Petter Helsing graduated from Konstfack's sculpture department in the 1980s. While travelling in Guatemala, he found that art there was ever present and available. Handwork skills were part of the collective, inherited memory (read his article on page 19).

He began to get interested in textile equipment – as the works of art they are in themselves. A band loom made by him was an exhibit in the show – a fantastic sculpture, which had led him to learn woodturning and chip carving. Inspired by all the patterned bands that have ever been and are being

*Horizon*, Royal Swedish Opera, Stockholm  
by Ulrika Mårtensson Photo: Michael Perlmutter.

Drape with a collage of Konstfack's history in the Konstfack restaurant.  
It was designed by Uglycute in collaboration with designer Johan Bisse Mattisson and Amica Sundström. Photo: Amica Sundström.

---

**Information links online:**

The Swedish National Heritage Board's set of Good Care Leaflets (in Swedish) are simple, digital advice sheets providing easy-to-understand answers to and practical advice concerning the care of cultural heritage.

[raa.se](http://raa.se)

LN Akustikmiljö AB  
Videos and information about acoustics.

[akustik.nu](http://akustik.nu)

---



woven all around the world and in Sweden, he now weaves his own.

Ulla Parkdal is proof that it's possible to earn one's living from handweaving. Her professional career began in 1962, doing work for Libraria and other places. Commissions that have come her way include those from various churches all around the country. She gave her audience at Konstfack several examples of her fabulous work, such as the bishop's cope for Caroline Krook. Ulla Parkdal highlights religious symbols and liturgical colours in her work, creating a stylish and worthy setting for church ritual.

She has also composed and woven unique, fine and beautifully made rugs for private customers. As befits her seniority, she now indulges in weaving free artwork in linen: skies, horizons and sea. On the loom a stripe becomes more than a stripe, more of an opening to a stylized, infinite landscape.

Konstfack's restaurant has a wall covered by a huge billowing weave, in the form of a collage compiled of work made by some of the designers and artists who are Konstfack alumni. Three buildings that have housed the college during its 175 years of existence have also been incorporated. *Uglycute*, was commissioned to make the cartoon.

Amica Sundström, former lecturer in

textiles specializing in constructed textiles at the Konstfack Textiles department, was asked where such an enormous textile could get printed. Asking a weaver where to do textile print is not the best approach. The answer was that the drape should of course be woven, and in digital Jacquard. The preparatory work was done on a computer and the drape, with its total width of 15 metres, was then woven by Ludvig Svensson in Kinna. Technical resources were fully and optimally utilized. The minimal palette of black, white and a couple of blues created a unified expression despite the complexity of the depicted content.

The acoustic environment in workplaces devoid of textiles and in public spaces is often quite disturbing. We can't hear what's being said, consonants drown in vowels. We're exposed to other people's voices, to low-frequency noise from ventilation systems, machines, devices, the hum from fridges. Our minds can't detach from the sound. We tire and get distracted. This is a big problem at pre-school and in school. Pre-school children speak louder and louder or even shriek to be heard. This jangle of sound leads to a lack of ability to concentrate. In a healthy sound environment, nobody need raise their voice to be heard. It is quiet and pleasant. Textiles have

a muffling effect depending on their constituent materials, construction and placement.

Lennart Nilsson, a senior acoustic consultant at Akustik Miljö (which he set up in 1974) has long-standing experience in this area. He described the changes that have taken place in his professional practice. Formerly, the acoustic consultants came in once everything else was done. They were supposed to deal with any sound issues arising from ill thought through architecture and choice of building materials. These days there is a far greater level of awareness and the need for these competences is growing. There is today a shortage of acoustic consultants.

The lecture hall such as the one we, the symposium attendees, were sitting in, would have in fact had no need of speakers, said Lennart Nilsson, had the environment been sound adjusted skilfully. Smooth side walls, textile sound absorbers on ca 5–10% of the background wall surface, a sound absorption textile right at the back of the room. Weaves should not be positioned flush against the wall but a few centimetres from it. Weaving technique and material are critical. One tip for checking whether a textile is sound absorbent is to blow air through it. A textile that allows air to pass through will also absorb sound.

He referred to Barbro Lomakka's woven,

**Top** Pop-up show in Konstfack's exhibition space, Vita havet: in the foreground a röllakan rug by Ulla Parkdal, recent interpretation in weave of a 1960s design. Rug *ORU/VIKA* (fold) by Linnea Blomgren, Rya by Miriam Parkman.

**Below** *Knit Illusion*, Helena Hernmarck.



**Below** Part of the curtain, *Dialogos*, for the UN in New York executed by the Friends of Handicraft (HV) studio, designed by Ann Edholm. *Damaged by movement*, by Josefina Gäfvert,

mentally harmful fire retardant is included in certification. So there remains a lot to be done. The regulations for certification need revising and renewing, along with the manner of protection for site-specific textile artwork.

Active in both USA and Sweden, textile artist Helena Hernmarck has since the sixties collaborated with architects, private commissioners and building contractors.

Although she resides in USA, she has been loyal to both Alice Lund Textilier, now in Borlänge, and Wälstedts Textilverkstad (Textile Workshop) in Dalarna. She first came to Alice Lund at the age of 17, returning on a practical placement before starting at Konstfack. Since 1975, twentyfour of her weaves have been produced there. Ebba Bergström was involved in the weaving of twenty of them. For 44 years Hernmarck has had the requisite yarns for her work custom dyed at

thick wool felt textiles as examples of excellent sound mufflers.

The Public Art Agency Sweden, founded in 1937, aims to support the purchase of site-specific art as well as separate art works for buildings, which are then placed in diverse public settings. The Agency is also responsible for a variety of art installations in urban development projects. Annika Enquist, now employed by Public Art Agency Sweden and formerly at IASPIS, showed examples of textile art purchases and also textile projects supported in different urban centres, including a textile dyeing project in a public housing district.

Public Art Agency Sweden makes around 200 purchases of art work annually. A very recent purchase was of Annika Ekdahl's *Wedding in Queens*. One third of the Agency's budget goes on textile art. Annika Enquist also showed Helena Hernmarck's woven work, *Newspapers*, 1967, which was hung in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs Press Club in 1968. When the function of that room changed, the weave became homeless and was therefore transferred to the National Museum's collections.

Since loose fittings cannot be protected by law, there is no protection for textile art in

public settings. Now with the rebuilding of the old Karolinska University Hospital, the site-specific, beautiful baptism room of 1940, later to serve as a meditation space, is under threat, despite the fact that it is a masterpiece by Alf Munthe and Greta Gahn.

A further problem arises with the requirements for fireproofing textiles. This affects the dyes and should not in fact be necessary if the material is wool, which is in itself an excellent protection against fire. But the environ-



**Blue Wash I** by Helena Hernmarck. Helena recounted in her lecture how, with the prospect of the original location of *Blue Wash I* and *Blue Wash II* changing hands, divided each tapestry into two pieces to create four. Two are shown here at their new home in the Minneapolis Institute of Art. A creative way of converting textile art for a new space.

Wälstedts. It is no exaggeration to state that she has for long periods been instrumental in financially rescuing these two companies through her large-scale commissions in USA and other places. Collaboration with Alice Lund, under its new proprietor Frida Lindberg, 2011, is ongoing.

In her lecture, she commended the older textile artists who were her mentors, to Alice Lund who taught her the profession, to her main tutor at Konstfack, Edna Martin, who inspired her to use free rosepath innovatively. The latter also taught her how to enlarge cartoons by photographic means and look at a weaving with binoculars turned the other way round to see its appearance from a distance.

Hernmarck also praised Astrid Sampe for her generosity in sharing her international contacts, returning several times to the importance of having contacts.

Helena Hernmarck has the ability to create tapestries where the motif moves from perfect focus into a gradual blur, giving the motif greater depth.

She has, with her monumental works, created new forms of aesthetic quality in the rooms and settings for which she had responsibility.

A Swedish artist who has chosen to express himself in woven textile artwork is Andreas Eriksson. He discovered he was more fascinated by the actual canvas than painting it. In his Berlin studio he has looms installed with five art weavers at work on them.

One of them, Sara Eriksson who is the studio manager, described the way they work. Linen in its natural beiges is their material for interpreting the cartoons and sketches given them by the artist.

One of the challenges for Eriksson's collaborators is to find solutions for dispatching these weaves to different shows worldwide without damaging the huge works. Ingeborg Skaar, textile conservator in Vara, has run her own business since 2003 in



partnership with two others who trained in the Department of Conservation at Gothenburg University, where Ingeborg Skaar used to teach. She talked about how old textiles are cleaned, without damaging them. It is important to first examine the dyes and check for bleeding. Different materials in a textile also affect the feasibility for cleaning. Textiles in public spaces are often flameproofed, which can be problematic. The flat woven edge is the best and most durable finish for a rug, as fringes wear out. Thread direction, sett, whether the weft runs horizontally or vertically also affect how a textile behaves.

She noted that it is important for funeral palls to be made of materials that can be cleaned, as this article gets frequent handling. To protect textiles from dirt, their placement in a room is significant as well as the method of hanging.

She showed several articles she has cleaned and restored, including the curtain for the Hjalmar Bergman theatre in Örebro, composed by Olle Nyman and woven at Alice Lund Textilier, a Barbro Nilsson rug, altar frontal from Karlskoga forest chapel, Skövde Crematorium and Nysund's old church, where there is a unique altar frontal by Agnes Branting.

Ulrika Mårtensson, lecturer in the Konstfack Textiles department, has a master's in textiles as well as being trained as an architect. Both these trainings have contributed to her interest in the spatial potential of textiles, as well

their construction and texture. She showed her work, *Horizon*, in felted wool and embroidery for the rotunda at the Royal Swedish Opera. She put in a lot of work so as to create the perfect sound environment. But the rotunda will soon be used for other purposes. In Old Uppsala church she found commissioners with greater interest in being involved. The same applied to Almgren's Silk Weaving Mill in Stockholm. For the latter she and Margot Barolo created in 2005 a sound muffling, beautiful curved wall of silk with a peerless texture as a divider for a lecture room. Almost 15 years on, this soft, textile wall is still in place and as beautiful.

Ulrika Mårtensson emphasized the importance of having a client who is interested and involved. She also described her experiments with self-supporting textiles and her desire to combine architecture and textiles. Textile material can be quite exceptional, fragile and strong at one and the same time.

The afternoon finished with a panel discussion led by interior architect Marcia Harvey Isaksson, who also runs Fiberspace Gallery. Topics such as the County Council's dread of bacteria, the essential supervision and care of textiles were raised, along with the significance of commissions and exhibitions. Those involved in the debate were all agreed that textiles have a major role to play in public settings. They make the environment more pleasant and soothing and according to me, the writer of this article, more beautiful and sensual.

---

*Kerstin Wickman, journalist, writer and professor of design and applied art history. This article, with more visual material, can be found at [www.svenskavakadem.se](http://www.svenskavakadem.se)*