

Book Review

Hannah Ryggen: Threads of Defiance

Marit Paasche

Thames & Hudson, 2019

288 pages

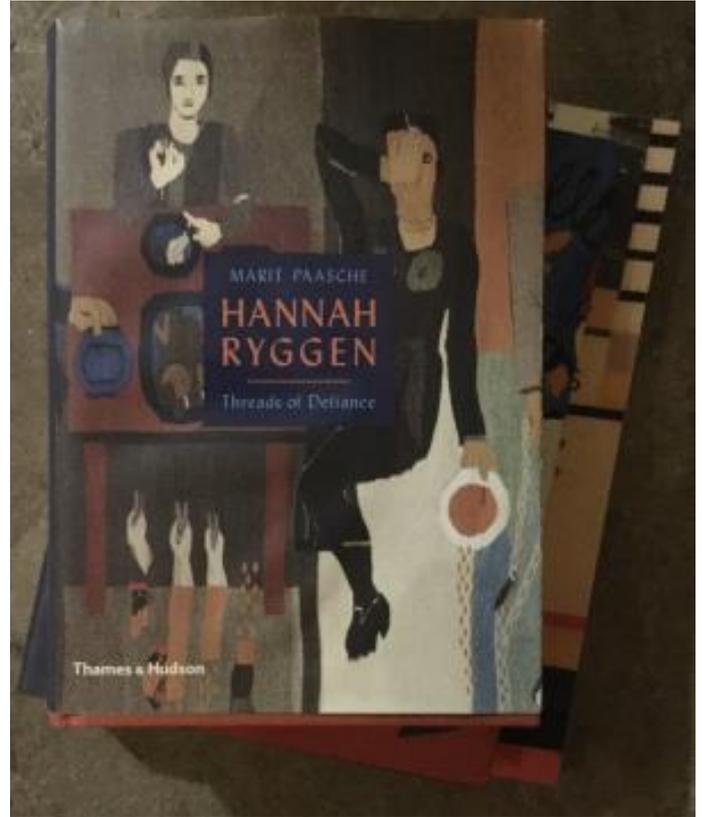
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[Hannah Ryggen : Threads of Defiance](#)

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In 2011 a bomb detonated in front of the 'Highrise' (the colloquial name of the government building in Oslo) leaving Hannah Ryggen's tapestry 'We are Living on a Star' lying in a pool of dirty water, concrete rubble and shards of glass. Later the bomber, Anders Behring Breivik, went on to kill 69 people, most of them children, at a youth camp on the island of Utøya.

Hannah Ryggen (1894-1970) would have woven this horror as a monumental tapestry and ensured that it was hung in a public space in memory of these wasted lives. She was a Swedish-Norwegian artist whose tapestries were well-known and admired in her lifetime, and was recognised as a genius by her, mainly male, critics. Her large output of tapestry work was mainly publicly hung as she refused private commissions when possible. She exhibited internationally on a regular basis but fell into the unknown from the 1970s. Frustratingly the author, Marit Paasche, doesn't cover this period and so tell us why. Perhaps she'll write a second work on Ryggen?

The significance of Hannah Ryggen as one of the most important figures in the history of Scandinavian art has only recently been rediscovered internationally, mainly thanks to Marit Paasche, who has studied Ryggen's work for the last ten years. Ryggen's rich archive of news cuttings, photographs, sketches and letters informed Paasche's work, whether radical political statements against Fascism and Nazism or against poverty and cruelty and injustice in her own country, newly independent Norway. Using these sources, Paasche focuses on the period of Ryggen's life that she shared with her husband, Hans, between the weaving of 'Fishing in the Sea of Debt' (1933) and 'We are Living on a Star' (1958). In 'We are Living on a Star' Ryggen has woven a naked man and woman lying within a large oval, the couple are encircled by a blue band binding and separating time, two babies lie either side of their feet; the family surrounded by the infinity of the cosmos. Ryggen described her thinking behind the tapestry: "I chose the shortest route: woman man child. They meet on earth, star among other stars, why no one knows, where they come from no one knows. They are there together: life's highest expression and purpose, and two children already on their way in to continue on the same path."

Responding to her grief at Hans's death, Ryggen wove 'We are Living on a Star' (1958) on a loom built by him. She had been commissioned, in 1955, by the Norwegian state to weave three monumental tapestries, to themes of her choice, to hang in the new government building, the Regjeringsbygget or Highrise designed by Erling Viksjø, whose novel sandblasted walls were the only other decoration.

There was another side to Ryggen's work and life which illuminated everything that she did, her closeness to nature, her respect and dependence on it and all living things. 'Us and Our Animals' (1934) was woven in response to the necessary slaughter of her geese including her beloved Kakeleja: "I had 10 geese. We slaughtered them all at once. I haven't eaten goose since." Unusually, for depictions of nature during this period, there is no sentimental romanticism. For the Ryggens on their small-holding, nature was very real. In 1948 Malmö Museum bought 'Us and Our Animals' for 25,000 Swedish kroner, a not inconsiderable sum which caused heated debate. As the Director, Ernst Fischer, wrote, "I managed to secure the purchase today. Politics were involved...The naysayers insisted on remaining anonymous in the minutes."

Hannah Ryggen's visually powerful tapestries are a mixture of folk narrative and decoration, social commentary and pure colours. The wool was mostly spun by her from her own sheep and dyed by her using local plants. At once hard-hitting and humorous, her works combine personal candour, social and political engagement and visual majesty.

Paasche explores Ryggen's bold subject matter, particular blend of abstraction and figuration, and use of contemporary and folk art not only within the context of Ryggen's life and beliefs, but also in the context of European art and politics of the first half of the 20th century. Not reading Norwegian, it's hard for me to know whether Paasche writes well or is served well by her translator, Katie Stieglitz, or a mixture of the two; but taken together the women speak confidently and calmly, leaving the tapestries, informed by Ryggen's voice through her archive, to speak for themselves.

Included in the book are excellent illustrations, many with detailed accompanying images, together with numerous photographs showing Hannah with her family on their small-holding, and in her contemporary world. But this is not a picture book for the coffee table. It is a very readable and scholarly account of Ryggen's work, backed up by a comprehensive list of works, bibliography, footnotes and archive resources. 'Hannah Ryggen: Threads of Defiance' provides an account of a remarkable artist. I recommend it to both weavers and non-weavers as a well-written document of a fascinating and turbulent time for Europe and its effect on an artist who engaged and wove to the full the life around her.