

Weaving a Future

by Thoma Ewen

Thoma shares with us her concerns of, on the one hand, an ageing population of artists and, on the other hand, the lack of making and creativity in schools today. The same concerns that Lesley Butterworth expressed in her recent article 'An idea whose time has come'. (Butterworth, L. March 2020. Tapestry Weaver issue 27, p. 22).



The weaving continues on The Vision Weave Project (Moon Rain Centre, 2019) co-directed by Thoma and Gabby Ewen. Photo © Thoma Ewen.

Among groups of tapestry weavers, it's impossible not to notice that most of our colleagues and peers are becoming 'seniors'. Those of us who have been weaving tapestry for a lifetime have to ask, "Where is the next generation?"

Over my forty-five year career as a professional tapestry artist who also teaches Artists-in-the-Schools projects in Canada, I have witnessed creative arts programming in public schools diminish. Budgets have been drastically cut. There is less art on the walls in our schools. In some schools there is none. There is less or no time in the curriculum for art. There are fewer and fewer trained art teachers on staff in school districts. How can we ensure that there are creative arts in the future if we don't teach them now? It is even more urgent for tapestry, which is not taught in the curriculum of most university Fine Art departments.

We can't wait for school boards and Ministries of Education to create budgets to fund creative programs in our public schools. The days of adequately funded arts programming in schools in which I worked in as a young adult in the 70s and 80s have disappeared. We need to begin these programs and activities ourselves, acting as individual creative members of our communities. We need to become creative community activists. The funding will come, and programs will be created, but we can't wait, we need to act.

There are children in schools in every community who are hungry for creative expression and for art and the crafts, for activities that are manual, hands-on and creatively engaging, and that flow from the intuitive and balance the intellectual.

We have an abundance of outstanding talent among the membership of tapestry groups. As many of us enter retirement age, we are collectively pondering the present phenomenon of an ageing group of tapestry artists, with just a very few young tapestry artists coming forward to fill the ranks. Most of us are finding that our studio classes are attended by retirement-age students. We each have so much to give, to share and to teach. We each have so much professional experience to draw on, and many stories so beautifully told in the tapestries that we weave and exhibit.

All ancient cultures understood the unique and important role of the grandmother as teacher and transmitter of knowledge. As a group of tapestry artists of a certain age, we have the privilege of carrying the knowledge of our art and craft, and we need to take the responsibility of sharing it, to

make sure that tapestry has a future. We must actively become the 'grandmothers' of our craft – embracing the idea that we are transmitting our art medium to the children of our culture, who are the future of tapestry.

I attended a conference on arts and education in Ottawa in 2011. The keynote speaker stated that the leading experts in education the world over are all in agreement that the curriculum, presently organized with science and mathematics as the top priorities and with the creative arts at the bottom, should actually be completely reversed, putting the creative arts at the top – because right now the world urgently needs creative thinking to solve the world's problems.

It only takes minutes for children of all ages to learn basic tapestry weaving technique. Kids understand tension when we point out the flowing sine wave path of the weft as it travels through the warp. They love it when we tell them that this sine wave pattern is the ancient symbol for life, and for flowing water. They understand the concept of building straight edges. Weaving is part of our cultural memory – it is a totally natural creative activity for most of us.

I was once doing an Artists-in-the-Schools project that lasted several days. On the second day a Grade 5 girl returned to class with a small wooden frame loom that her grandfather had made for her the evening before. On the third day she returned with a completed weaving and announced: "Now I know I will never be alone". She had made a profound discovery through tapestry weaving, a discovery that is deeper than craft, deeper than enjoyment and pleasure in creative expression. The teacher and I both smiled and said "Wonderful" to the girl, and then looked at each other and we each turned away to wipe the little tears that had welled up. There are often special things that happen when working with kids in schools. Truly, it is a privilege to have something to share - something that, every once in a while, can make a difference to a child's future.

At present, worldwide, there is renaissance in tapestry. Exhibitions such as 'Woven By Hand: Contemporary Canadian Tapestries', which I curated and in which I participated in 2019, clearly demonstrated that tapestry is very highly appreciated by gallery visitors. As tapestry weavers we need to ensure that this art form continues, and educating our future generations is crucial. We can make a place for tapestry in our communities by doing it, by exhibiting it and by teaching it.

Make tapestry public, make it accessible, make it enjoyable, and make it part of the future.

Thoma Ewen is a Canadian tapestry weaver and author of The Living Tapestry Workbook. She will be speaking at the International Contemporary Tapestry Symposium in Galway, Ireland May 22-24, 2020, and participating in the group exhibition Tapestry 20/20.

<https://projectbaabaa.clr.events/event/128794:international-contemporary-tapestry>

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The children expressed visions for a clean, healthy environment and for peace on earth.