

# Book Review

## Gloria F. Ross & Modern Tapestry

Ann Lane Hedlund

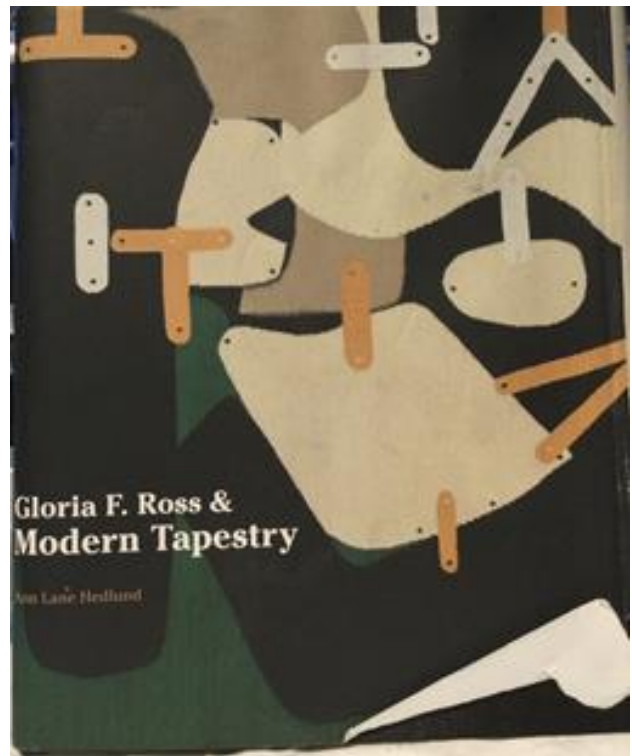
Publisher: Yale University Press (in association with Arizona State Museum, The University of Arizona)

Colour plates: generously illustrated throughout in full colour

Date published: 2010

ISBN: 780300166354

Review by Sally Reckert, January 2023



*Gloria F. Ross & Modern Tapestry (book cover)*

Ann Lane Hedlund had a long working relationship and friendship with Gloria F. Ross (1923-1998). They first met in 1979 when the anthropologist Hedlund was asked by Ross to introduce her to Navajo weavers who might be able to translate the American abstract artist Kenneth Noland's paintings into tapestry. From this introduction the two women went on to co-curate exhibitions of Navajo works and to found the Gloria F. Ross Center for Tapestry Studies (1997) with Hedlund as its first director.

Ross lived in New York and became a passionate champion of colour in art, rug hooking tapestry; so much so that weavers will all recognise Ross's need to convert her child's bedroom into a dedicated weaving room. 1971 was a turning point for Ross, she gave up the role of weaver for that of a go-between for weavers and artists, or in her words, used in jest, "*Éditrice américaine de tapisseries d'artistes contemporains*".

Ross knew the American art scene of the 1950s and 1960s intimately through her sister, Helen Frankenthaler who, as an abstract painter was friends with many of the American Color Field artists that Ross later approached for works to translate into tapestry. The art critic Irvine Sandler first coined the term Color Field to refer to the work of the abstract expressionist painters Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and Clyfford Still, all of whose paintings were characterised by large areas of a more or less flat single colour. Ross described the tapestries from these artists' works as "the translation of paint into wool".

Gottlieb's 'Black Disc on Tan' (1970, oil on paper) was considerably enlarged by Archie Brennan at the Dovecot Studios. This was a seemingly plain black woven disc, but the complexity of the dense black was not achieved by a variety of dyes but by using the same dye vat and many variations of spun and plied thread to give the same depth of black as in the painting, but with an added complexity achieved in a way that no painting could, "...such that the tapestry has an identity that is its own..." (Brennan).

The French atelier Pinton was chosen for the translation of more detailed works by artists such as Robert Motherwell, Frank Stella and Romare Bearden. As Ross said "I could achieve my goal more successfully by seeking weavers here and abroad who could best bring out the distinctive

qualities of a given artist's work. The effort of the artisans is as important, of course, as the artists in this collaboration."

Ross not only commissioned weavings but also exhibited, marketed and sold them "Tapestries offer the opportunity to own a large, authentic example of the absolute best work of an important artist for up to 1/100th of the cost of a painting".

Throughout her working life Ross wrote and received copious letters and notes and it's this wealth of documentary evidence (now housed as the Gloria F. Ross Papers in the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian) that Hedlund has been able to draw on and present in this clear and thoroughly researched book.

Chapters in this book flow from the Introduction and early years of Ross's own rug hooking and weaving, through the friendships and collaborations she initiated as she journeyed through Europe and America selecting tapestry workshops whose styles she decided were most appropriate to the painters whose works she had chosen.

The bulk of the book is devoted to full-page illustrations, a photographic record in alphabetical order of the painters that Ross worked with and the resultant tapestries from their works on the facing page for comparison. The quality of the images allows for a visual understanding of the painters' marks and how they were translated into the weft of tapestry.

The final chapter, 'Tapestry in the Late Twentieth Century', is more about Ross's skills and her dedication to marketing and exhibiting the tapestries that she commissioned rather than an appraisal of late-twentieth century tapestry in general.

Based on the letters and notes between painters, weavers and Ross, Hedlund sets out the pros and cons of Ross's translations from one medium to another. She takes the reader through Ross's choices of workshops and what she was looking for in a collaboration. Hedlund uses the material to reveal the art practices of the day and the differing styles of the ateliers and weavers. Dovecot's collaborative and creative interpretation of paintings under Archie Brennan's directorship. Pinton's formulaic approach based on centuries of manufacture and the vast range of in-house dyed yarns. Navajo weavers, chosen by Ross for their innate understanding of geometric pattern. Of the Navajo weavers, Hedlund comments that "while many may not be able to articulate their complex concepts of style verbally, they are skilled at generating and recreating expressive visual forms from commonly held cultural principles that have evolved through centuries of weaving". These observations are highlighted in the many detailed and excellent colour images of original artworks and their weaving translations.

The index, the lavish and often detailed illustrations, the footnotes and the bibliography all work together to enable easy cross-referencing. Ann Lane Hedlund is scrupulous in documenting the material in a clear, analytical manner.

## **References:**

Gloria Ross and Helen Frankenthaler, 1981 September. Gloria Ross papers, circa 1924-1998. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

Helen Frankenthaler. Maquette for Fourth National Bank and Trust tapestry commission, circa 1975. Gloria Ross papers, circa 1924-1998. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Helen Frankenthaler. Diagram of weaving sample for Fourth National Bank and Trust tapestry commission, 1974. Gloria Ross papers, circa 1924-1998. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<https://annhedlundauthor.wordpress.com/>

<https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/gloria-ross-papers-16163>

Book cover photo: Sally Reckert