

Book Review

Weaving a Chronicle

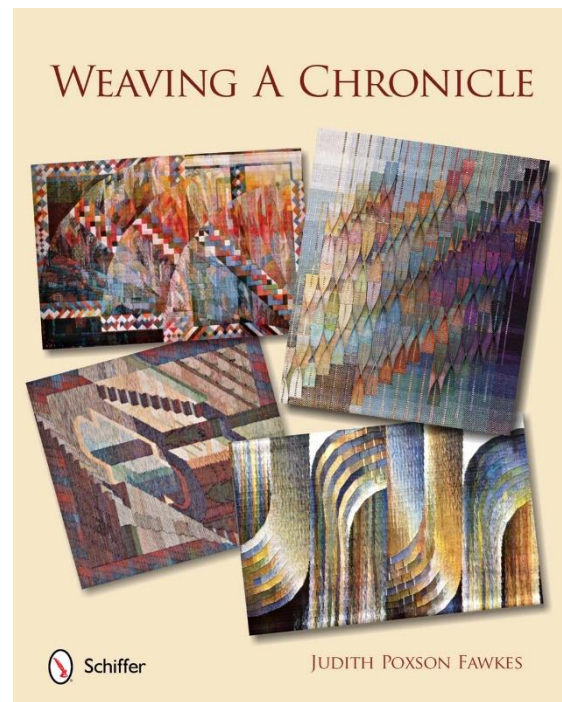
Judith Poxson Fawkes

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160 pp.; illustrated throughout in full colour

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Review by Sally Reckert



Weaving a Chronicle (book cover)

I've been delighted to discover this author's work. Judith Poxson Fawkes's writing is spare and to the point as she highlights moments in her weaving life. The publisher has generously displayed her tapestries throughout the book in 98 text-facing colour images. As the author says, the tapestries are: "...the truer chronicle...my telling about the tapestries may metamorphose, but their woven structure does not".

The contents list does duty as both an index of works and a general index - though, not knowing Poxson Fawkes's works, I found that the titles of her weavings against page numbers gave me no idea of what I might find on that page.

Beginning in 1989, Judith Poxson Fawkes wove prolifically throughout her life, before she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's in 2014 and died in 2018. She may have been aware of her fading memory, and so been prompted to write this autobiography, using the best of her work to illustrate the artistic and technical choices that she made.

Tapestry is a term that she admits to using "indiscriminately and interchangeably" to refer to pattern rather than cloth weaving. "I find a lot of freedom in the limitations [of tapestry]. In traditional tapestry, the warp - or the bones of the fabric - is covered up with fine wool. I think this is out of step with our times. They take forever to produce. In my tapestries, you see the structure much like you do in good architecture."

Inlay weaving, or half-tapestry as it is known in Scandinavia, refers in general to inlay techniques in which a continuous background weft is woven into the warp with a shuttle selvedge-to-selvedge supporting a discontinuous pattern inlaid with the fingers in the manner of tapestry. This manner of weaving considerably speeded up her tapestry work, enabling Poxson Fawkes to fulfil commissions at a more competitive price.

Poxson Fawkes found the structure of buildings and American street-plans valuable sources of inspiration, either as cityscapes photographed from the air, by Poxson Fawkes herself, and later buildings imagined as axonometric structures. However, her series of cityscapes woven for commissions between 1983 and 1988 began to pall: "A sense of remove and lack of spontaneity were the disheartening results of duplicating a city designed by unknown people, from a photograph I'd taken to please a client."

Invented Landscapes (1987) was the first in a series of weavings that Poxson Fawkes wove in reaction to her past works, woven on demand for clients. From that point on she used only linen, thickened the inlay weft and thinned the warp, took to creating her initial pattern on graph paper, and, importantly for her creativity, used axonometric perspectives. These tapestries are perhaps Poxson Fawkes's most intriguing works. They combine precision of design and execution with pure fantasy, like an Escher drawing of stairs never having a beginning or ending.

Her weavings became more complex as she changed direction in style and material; linen became an absorbing expression of her art. For her work, *Homage to Flax* (1998), she grew, harvested

and retted the flax. She traced the shapes of the flax bundles and dried seed pods to add as woven embellishments to her map of the Americas "a graphic juxtaposition of have and have-not – the land of plenty without the now rare fibre that was once so beautiful" where she lived.



*Homage to Flax, 67" x 73", linen inlay
(woven, 1998)*

Red Alder (commissioned by Unico Properties, Seattle 1991) is an imaginative combination of botanical and geometric water/wave patterns for three elevator lobbies in a building. This original and striking combination for a workaday space perhaps influenced later weavers such as Helena Hernmarck (*Maple Tree and Flower*, installed 2019 in the elevator lobby at 35 Hudson Yards, New York).

Through her gallery in Portland, Oregon, Laura Russo exhibited and mentored Judith Poxson Fawkes from 1990 until

Laura died in 2010. From 2004 a body of works involving water were woven in inlay and double cloth including her *Moving Water* series, "influenced by news photos of Hurricane Katrina [2005] and the devastation in New Orleans".

After Laura Russo's death Judith Poxson Fawkes returned to double weave, a technique that she admired most from Bauhaus weavings. She exhibited a number of double-woven cloths at the Laura Russo gallery in 2010, including *Armada*, under the title *Water and Wind*.

In *Weaving a Chronicle*, Poxson Fawkes not only reflects on the joys of designing and weaving her tapestries but also speaks poignantly about the sadness behind some of her weavings.

Her destruction of many of her own samples and tapestries after her parents' deaths was prompted by having to clear their house and not wanting her daughters to have to do the same for her. "I consider purging, which is a value judgement, almost as important as drawing, sampling, and weaving new tapestries."

Weaving a Chronicle is not a technical manual but a visual chronology, written as the author looks back over her weaving life to see how her ideas and designs evolved, how she combined the speed and strength of shuttle weaving with the haptic creativity of patterning inlay tapestry with her fingers. She engages the reader not just with her visual work but also through the questions she asks and the responses she gives as she develops her weaving voice.