

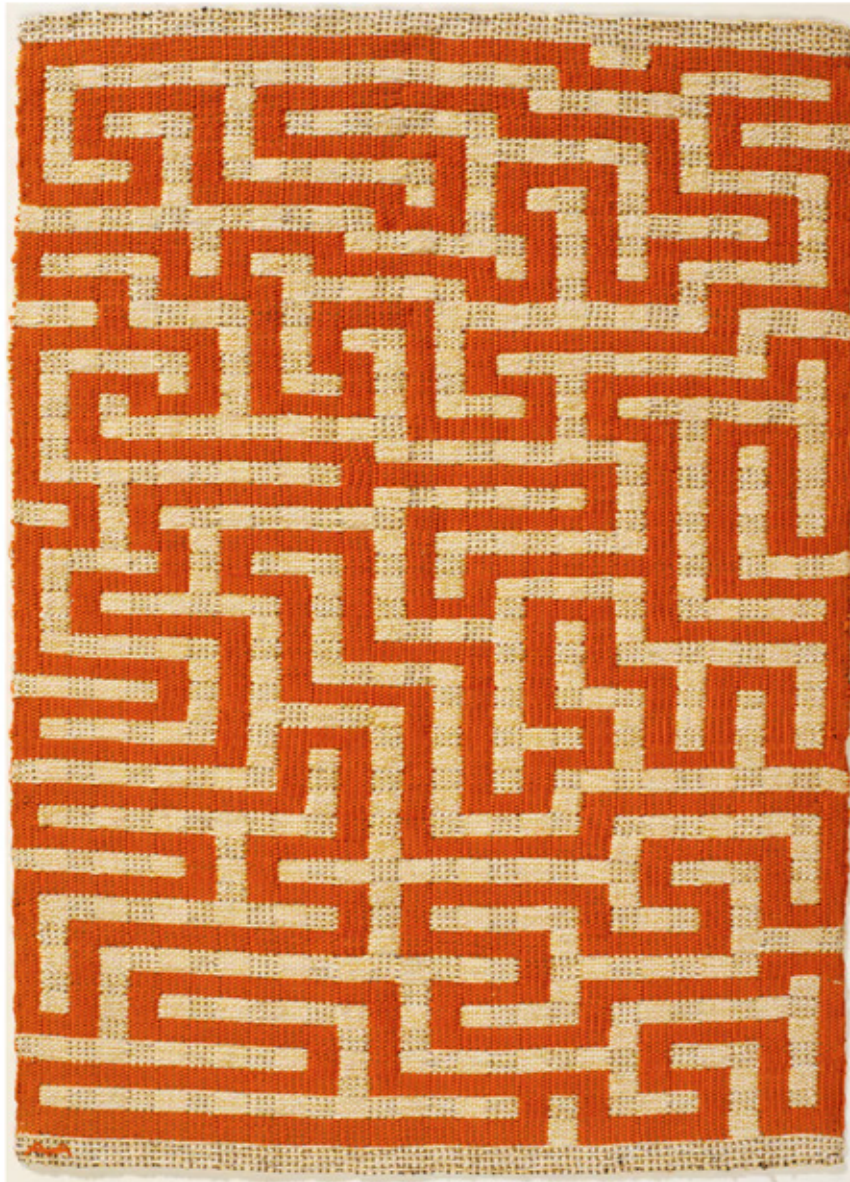
Why textiles are all the rage in the art world right now

Two major exhibitions celebrate how the simple act of weaving can be filled with sophistication, beauty and meaning.



Review by [Sebastian Smee](#)

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Anni Albers, "Red Meander," 1954. Linen and cotton. (Tim Nighwander/Imaging4Art/Josief and Anni Albers Foundation/Artists Rights Society, New York/Private collection)

My father is a weaver. He makes tea towels, rugs, curtains, cushion covers, tapestries and tablecloths. As I write this, my feet are touching one of his rugs, which is bordered with a Greek-style meander, a pattern named for a winding river in Asia Minor.

Dad, who taught ancient Greek and Latin, took up weaving in his 20s. He still weaves every day on a big loom he built himself. As a child, I watched, marveling (and sometimes a little bored, as kids inevitably are by their parents' activities) as he set up the warp.

That could take days. This was in Australia, and in summer the urbane voice of the great cricket commentator Jim Maxwell would play over the radio as my dad's feet pressed the pedals that raised and lowered the threads of the warp, according to a logic that was quite beyond me.

This much I could see: Dad would roll the shuttle back and forth between the warp's separated threads. The shuttle deposited unspooling thread — the weft — and after each pass (left to right, then right to left) he hammered them together with two perfectly weighted bangs of a beater that hung from the frame above.

In weaving, there are two choices. The weft either goes over or under the warp, thereby concealing or revealing itself. As computer scientists know, binary systems can get very complex. In fact, the technologies of weaving — especially the miraculous punch hole system of the Jacquard loom, invented at the beginning of the 19th century — led directly into the computer technologies that have transformed our world.

Weaving, that's to say, is not some peripheral subject, off to the side of culture. It's one of the most extraordinary, sophisticated things humans have ever managed to do. It's connected not just to survival tools (clothing, blankets, baskets, traps), but also to the human capacity for abstract thought, and of course to beauty and art.

Flaring recognition of this may partly explain why textiles are all the rage in the art world right now. Two fabulous exhibitions at major museums — the National Gallery of Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art — give us occasion to dig deeper into why textiles are suddenly so in vogue. Is it just a fleeting phenomenon? Or do textiles dovetail mysteriously and unexpectedly with the zeitgeist?

There's no question that some of the most talked about contemporary artists — Diedrick Brackens, Harmony Hammond, Igshaan Adams, Jeffrey Gibson — work with textiles. Scholars and curators are falling over themselves to establish lines of influence and contemporary thematic relevance. So for much of the past decade, overdue attention has been raining down on such previously overlooked pioneers of modernism as Anni Albers, Gunta Stölzl and Sonia Delaunay, all of whom worked with textiles.

Some scholars are making original arguments about how those underappreciated female artists related to the modernist project in general and how they feed into today's debates about identity and politics. Art made from textiles, some claim, breaks down the divide between art (historically dominated by men) and craft (traditionally a female realm), so it's inherently feminist. Textiles, claim others, can be pro-Indigenous, pro-queer, pro-labor and pro-environment.

Many of these claims, which take up more space in the National Gallery show than at the Met, are worth exploring. Others rest on questionable premises. Worse, they tend to reduce the works themselves to curators' playthings. That's a shame when so many of them are fascinating on about six levels at once.

The two exhibitions are conceived quite differently, but they feature some of the same artists. The Met show, which is smaller, is divided into two distinct sections. One displays ravishing examples of textile art from the Andes: tunics, loincloths and dresses, feathered panels, fringed bags, and khipus (devices that use twists and knots for record-keeping and storytelling). Dating from the first millennium B.C.E. to the 16th century, these objects — made from the hair of llamas and vicuñas, macaw feathers, and cotton, and miraculously preserved by the dry Andean air — all attest to a sophisticated array of weaving techniques, iconography and abstract design.

The second part of the show is devoted to four 20th-century modernist women who were influenced by Andean textiles (and who also appear in the NGA show): Albers, Sheila Hicks, Olga de Amaral and Lenore Tawney. Andean textiles became known to these women, who were all loosely tied to the fiber art movement of the 1960s and '70s, thanks to archaeologists who brought many treasures to light in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Albers taught at the Bauhaus and then, after fleeing the Nazis, at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. She had first encountered Andean textiles as a teenager at the Ethnological Museum of Berlin. She was later influenced by her travels in Mexico.

She and her husband, Josef, loved the interlocking pattern known as the “meander,” which appears not only in ancient Greece, but also in Navajo blankets and throughout the ancient cultures of Central and South America. Her “Red Meander,” from 1969, inventively doubles the motif, resulting in a design that resembles a maze seen from above.

At Yale University, where Josef ended up teaching, Albers was a transformative influence on Hicks. After meeting Albers, Hicks was introduced to Andean textiles by two scholars, George Kubler and Junius Bird, after which she set off for South America for two years in 1957.

In my opinion, Hicks is the most accomplished living American artist never to have been granted a full-blown retrospective by a top-tier American museum. (When you consider who has been anointed by some of these institutions, her relative neglect is beyond dismaying — it’s a scandal.) So it’s exciting to see fine examples of her oftentimes spectacular, sometimes endearingly modest, and always breathtakingly inventive work in both Washington and New York.



Sheila Hicks, “Peluca Verde,” 1960-1961. Wool. (Sheila Hicks)

Where Albers was under the spell of Bauhaus dictums about form following function and transparency of technique and material, Hicks was more restless. She followed artistic intuition and her own spirit of discovery into weirder places than Albers.

Paul Klee, who had been with Albers at the Bauhaus, liked to talk about the pleasures of “taking a line for a walk.” You can see his influence in Hicks’s “minimes,” a term she invented for the small, roughly rectangular weavings she began making on her trip to South America. Intimate, amusing and gorgeously intuitive, the minimes are as fresh and idiosyncratic as Klee’s paintings.

But Hicks, who talked about “the voyage of the line,” had a more capacious view. In works of dazzling freedom and inventiveness, often on a grand scale, she took preexisting assumptions about what was possible within the warp-and-weft structure of weaving and turned them on their heads.

To appreciate this, and to see how Hicks opened herself up to the influence of other cultures (not just Peruvian makers), you really have to get up close to her works. Only then do you see how they buck against inherent structures, borrow ideas and wander off into dreamy, sensuous fancies, achieving great beauty in the process.

The NGA show, which was organized by Lynne Cooke, dives deeper into the intersection of weaving and modern art. But conceptual ambition doesn't always translate into coherent exhibition design. Where the Met show has the advantage of concision and clarity, the NGA show loses its way a little, picking up (you could say) too many loose threads, taking on too much and cloaking it all in too much academic jargon.

Still, it's not to be missed. It's full of great things, almost every one of which fires your curiosity about how, why and with what it was made.

Liz Collins's insanely beautiful "Heartbeat," made from silk and linen woven on a Jacquard loom, resembles both the digital readout of a heart monitor and open-heart surgery (the threads have been cut, revealing a kind of wound at the composition's center).

Igshaan Adams combines plastic and stone beads with turmeric, tea and cotton twine in his sumptuous wall hanging. His piece was inspired by a fragment of cheap linoleum from a "Coloured" township in South Africa where Adams grew up, Muslim and queer. In his weaving, he uses thread to "mend" the damaged parts of the original design. His reparative actions and the overall palimpsest-like design of the textile provide a lovely metaphor for the workings of memory.

Aside from textiles per se, there are woven or grid-based sculptures in the show by the likes of Ruth Asawa (who loved the meander pattern), Martin Puryear and Yvonne Koolmatrie (working in the tradition of Australia's Indigenous Ngarrindjeri people).

Several works make the connection between weaving and computing explicit. One of these is a hanging textile by Marilou Schultz called "Replica of a Chip." Schultz, who grew up on a Navajo/Diné reservation, was commissioned to make this 1994 work by the Intel corporation.

Based in Silicon Valley, Intel saw affinities between Native American abstract aesthetics and its own chip designs. And in one of those ironies that resemble a hall of mirrors more than a simple inversion of meaning, the company that commissioned Schultz also employed a largely Indigenous female workforce to assemble its circuit boards in a newly built factory on Navajo/Diné land.

Nothing binary, it seems, ever stays that way.