

# From Collage To Tapestry: Louise Nevelson, Gloria Ross & The Dovecot Studios of Edinburgh

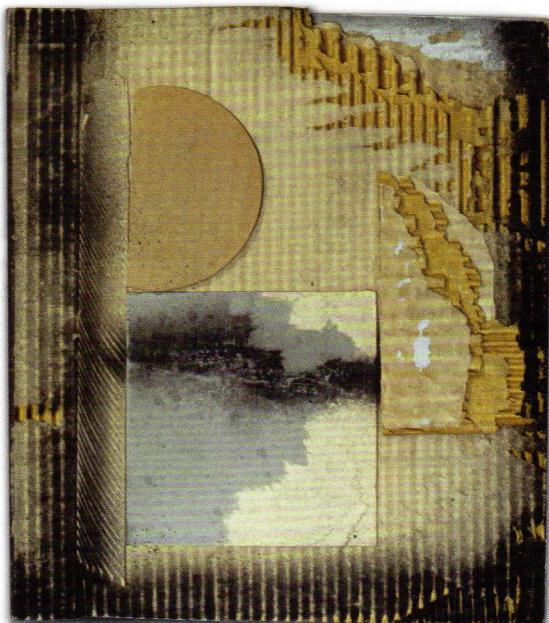
By Ann Lane Hedlund

Between 1972 and 1976, the well-known American sculptor Louise Nevelson expressly created a series of collages as models for modern tapestries. Over the next eight years, 15 unique tapestries were woven at the Dovecot Studios in Edinburgh, Scotland, under the artistic direction of Archie Brennan and, later, Fiona Mathison. Gloria F. Ross was the visionary originator of this collaborative project, assuming the role known in France as a tapestry *éditeur*. These wall hangings, as interpretations of heretofore unknown collages, emerge as powerful innovations of the time.

**A Career in the Textile Arts**  
Beginning in 1963 and continuing for the next 34 years, Gloria Ross worked with celebrated American and European painters to create or adapt

over 100 designs that were made into masterful wall hangings. About half of these hand hooked rugs and woven tapestries were singular pieces, and half were made in multiple editions of three to seven, resulting in 248 individual panels.

Ross worked first with abstract designs from her sister, the widely accomplished painter Helen Frankenthaler, and then from modernist images by her brother-in-law, abstract expressionist Robert Motherwell. In all, she worked with 28 painters and sculptors, including Romare Bearden, Jean Dubuffet, Adolph Gottlieb, Paul Jenkins, Morris Louis, Louise Nevelson, Kenneth



B.

A.  
*Landscape (within Landscape)*, 1979  
wool and other natural fiber wefts  
on cotton warp, 82.5 x 63 inches  
photo: Eric Pollitzer. © Estate of  
Louise Nevelson/Artists Rights  
Society (ARS), New York

B.  
*Maquette for Landscape (within Landscape)*, 1976, mixed media,  
11.5 x 8.5 inches  
photo: Gloria F. Ross. © Estate  
of Louise Nevelson/Artists Rights  
Society (ARS), New York

Noland, Lucas Samaras, Frank Stella, and Jack Youngerman. After operating her own New York studio briefly, Ross engaged tapestry weavers, first in 1970 at the Dovecot Studios in Edinburgh, Scotland, and then at workshops in Aubusson and Felletin in France. Later she worked with Navajo and Pueblo weavers in the American Southwest, the Victorian Tapestry Workshop in Australia (see Walker 2007), and broadloom weavers in China and the United States. Ross's devotion to such projects came from a belief that tapestry's rich textures, hues and history rivaled any other medium. Her dedication to reviving traditional European tapestry grew in the 1960s, just as the fiber art movement pushed weavers from their

looms and pulled free-standing work off the walls. The collaborations between Ross, Nevelson and Brennan moved against this tide and demonstrate the long-lasting merit of innovative studio-based projects.

## Nevelson – Sculptor and Collage Maker

Louise Nevelson was born in 1899 in Russia, but grew up in Maine and established her career in New York. Calling herself "an architect of shadows," she painted many of her large-scale wood and found object constructions entirely black; others were white. In both extremes, she emphasized the crevices, shadows and textures

of the materials. Her large sculpture *Sky Cathedral* joined the collections of the Museum of Modern Art in 1958. She showed in the Venice Biennale in 1962 and gained an international reputation during the last quarter of the 20th century.

Nevelson cultivated a reputation for flamboyance. Although she didn't make textiles, she displayed a unique sense of personal fashion. Ross commented, "There was something so wonderfully gothic about much of Nevelson's work and Nevelson herself, who was an artwork unto herself. Her wonderful costumes, and those big mink eyelashes, and all the rest – the turbans!"

Nevelson showed at Pace Gallery on 57th Street in Manhattan. Tapestries orchestrated by Ross were represented by Pace Editions, Pace's print-dealing counterpart at the same location. Gallery directors Arnold Glimcher and Richard Solomon played major roles in bringing together Ross and Nevelson, sharing the venture's cost, and marketing the art. Discussions among the four began in 1970; two years later things began to materialize.

#### The Dovecot Studios and Archie Brennan

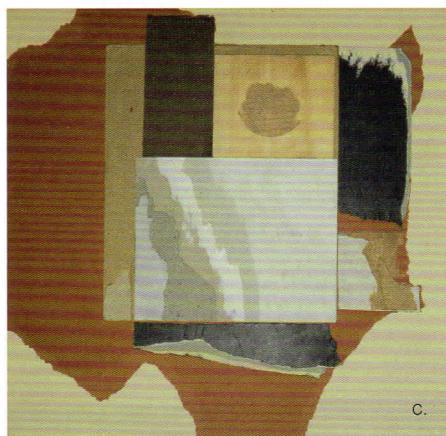
By 1972, Ross had already been working for several years with Archie Brennan, artistic director of the Dovecot Studios in Edinburgh. A superb artist and master weaver, he rapidly became her mentor. His team of expert weavers had created expressive "GFR Tapestries" from purpose-made models and extant paintings by Motherwell, Frankenthaler, Gottlieb, Noland, Youngerman and others.

The Dovecot Studios were established in 1912, eventually becoming known as the Edinburgh Tapestry Company. Founded by a Scottish nobleman and run for decades by family members, the studio produced grand scale tapestries for aristocratic patrons. During the 1950s, the operation transformed into a commercially viable artistic venture, weaving tapestries from designs by recognized artists for public sale and commissions.

Archie Brennan arrived as an apprentice at the Dovecot in 1948 and became artistic director in 1964. He employed both men and women (where only men were previously hired), and brought in the first college-trained weavers. The skilled artisans who worked on GFR Tapestries included Maureen Hodge, Fiona Mathison, Jean Taylor, Douglas Grierson, Harry Wright, Fred Mann, Neil McDonald and apprentices Johnny Wright and Gordon Brennan.

C.  
*Maquette for The Late, Late Moon*, 1976, mixed media, 19 x 20 inches  
Photo by Gloria F. Ross. © Estate of Louise Nevelson/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

D.  
*Sky Cathedral II*, 1974-77 (edition of 5 plus 2 artist's proofs), wool and other natural fiber wefts on cotton warp, 88 x 70 inches. Photo by Peter Ferling, courtesy of Teleflex Incorporated. © Estate of Louise Nevelson/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



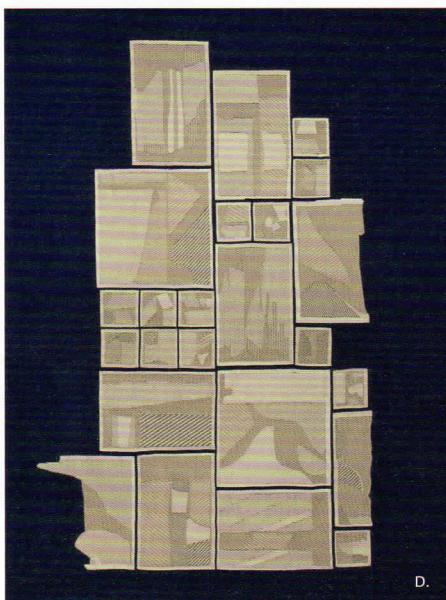
#### Nevelson Collages, Dovecot Tapestries

The first model made by Louise Nevelson for a GFR Tapestry was a lead intaglio collage called *Sky Cathedral*, named after her 1950s construction series. Multiple leaden-gray pieces with stamped designs and texture were separately affixed to heavy paper. Originally part of the 1971 print series *Night Sound*, executed in multiples for Pace Gallery, this particular version was modified specifically for tapestry, as Nevelson and Ross adjusted the puzzle-like pieces until appropriate for weaving.

Two quite different tapestries resulted from the maquette. In "Sky Cathedral I" the weavers used gold-colored metallic threads in a nubby weave on a deep black wool background.<sup>1</sup> When Nevelson saw this first tapestry, she exclaimed in her booming voice, "That's not a Nevelson, that's a Ross!" The *New York Times* singled it out: "Surely the Nevelson, a dazzling gold against black hanging ... is one of the freshest approaches in this genre" [of hand-woven tapestries].<sup>2</sup> Nevelson's original reaction notwithstanding, she grew eager to proceed with other tapestries.

The woven interpretation of "Sky Cathedral II" emerged as white-on-white patterning on a deep blue wool background. Its textured interlacements and shading reveal Brennan's admiration for Nevelson's white-on-white constructions.<sup>3</sup>

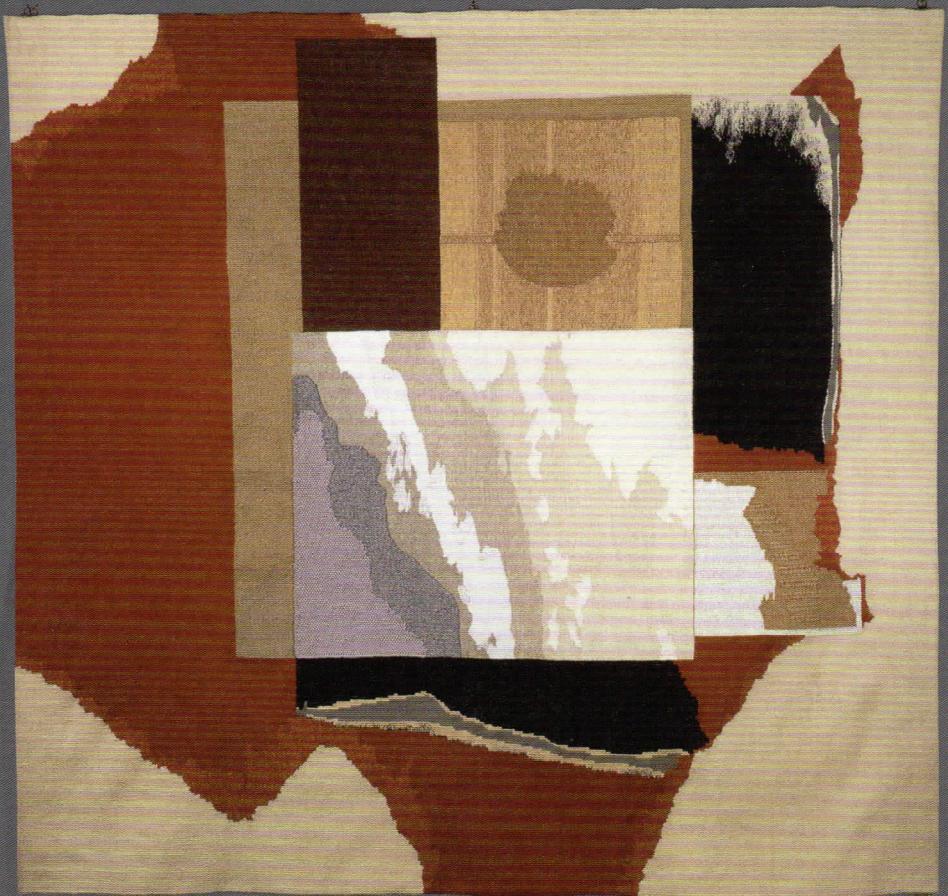
Following the *Sky Cathedral* tapestries, Nevelson exhorted Ross to "Go beyond!" and declared she would make more maquettes only if each became a one-of-a-kind weaving. Thus began plans for the "Uniques," as Nevelson called them, for which she'd gained inspiration a few years earlier. Her long-time assistant, Diana Mackown has recalled, "I traveled with Louise in 1972 to Amarillo, Texas, where she [was] to give a kind of seminar ... After her work there, we rented a car and drove to New Mexico to visit Georgia O'Keeffe [at her home in Abiquiu]. We also made a few trips to Arizona ..."<sup>4</sup>



E.  
*The Late, Late Moon*, 1980, wool and other natural fiber wefts on cotton warp, 69 x 73 inches  
photo: Eric Pollitzer. © Estate of Louise Nevelson/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

F.  
*Sky Cathedral I*, 1972, wool, linen, and metallic/synthetic wefts on cotton warp, 84 x 68 inches  
photo: Gloria F. Ross © Estate of Gloria F. Ross

The stunning landscapes of the Southwest's deserts and uplands clearly made an impact. By 1976, Nevelson had created seven brilliant little collages made from torn papers, scumbled and folded cardboards, and other found materials. Small in comparison to most of Nevelson's monumental works, these ranged from 8.5 x 6 inches to 19 x 20 inches, and are now known only through 35mm slides. In earthy tones and rough textures, most received titles evoking arid lands – *Night Mountain*, *Desert*, *Dusk in the Desert*, *Mirror Desert*, *Reflection*, *Landscape (within Landscape)*, and *The Late, Late Moon*.



E.



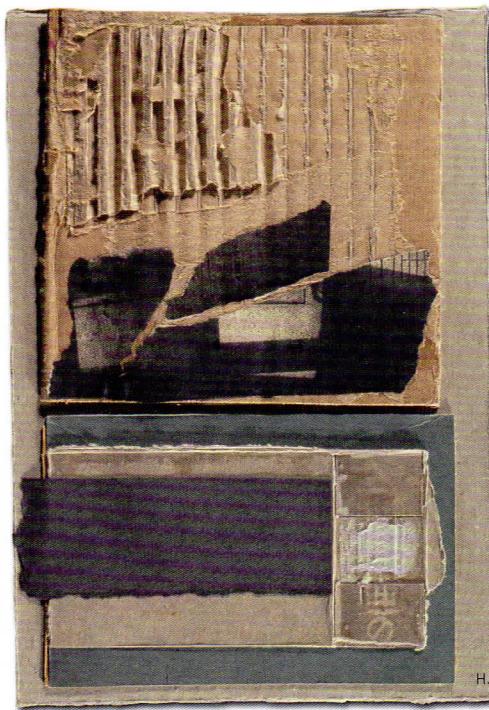
F.



To view the collages and discuss the project, Archie Brennan met directly with Nevelson, Ross and the gallery directors in New York. Whereas tapestry commissions usually proceeded from photos and secondary cartoons, Nevelson's collages flew to Edinburgh and the weavers worked from originals.

Despite their diminutive size, the maquettes' complexity required many woven trials. Studio members painstakingly explored fibers, yarns, weaves and structures to interpret the collages. Depending principally on the weavers' creativity, samples were sent to Ross who decided what to share with Nevelson, Glimcher and Solomon. Staff involvement was intense – Brennan once joked that the Dovecot had practically become the "Nevelson Tapestry Company."

Scale changed from notebook-sized collages to woven works measuring dozens of square feet. As described in *Gloria F. Ross & Modern Tapestry*, "Corrugations grew into weaverly ripples and channels; a crumpled piece of silver foil became shiny silver-toned threads; feathered, tattered edges smoothed into more subtle margins." In addition, the weavers "created intentionally distorted slits, tightened or loosened yarn tension, varied interlacing over one or multiple warps, and employed on-loom wrapping stitches. They also employed ... color blending, hatching, pick-and-pick alternation of colors, and modulated shading."



G.  
*Dusk in the Desert*, wool and other natural fiber wefts on cotton warp  
84 x 58 inches  
photo: Gloria F. Ross. © Estate of Louise Nevelson/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

H.  
*Maquette for Dusk in the Desert*,  
1976, mixed media  
approx. 13 x 11 inches  
photo: Gloria F. Ross. © Estate of Louise Nevelson/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

The tapestries were sold through Pace and acquired by corporate and private collections. Although individually shown in museum or company settings, they've never been shown collectively. The collages' dispositions are unknown.

#### Interpretation not Reproduction

Gloria F. Ross's complex tapestry-making projects never proceeded the same way twice – each developed a different dynamic between her, the selected artist and chosen weavers. For the Nevelson-Dovecot projects, three strong characters came together and clicked. Louise Nevelson had, in Ross's words, "crazy elegance and style, humor and artistry." The usually indomitable Gloria Ross gave Archie Brennan the lead as her mentor. He in turn shared technical challenges with his skilled team. The special

interpretive nature of the GFR Tapestries grew from these unique interactions.

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This essay was adapted from a 2010 presentation at the Biennial Symposium of the Textile Society of America in Lincoln, Nebraska. It expands on research for the recent book, *Gloria F. Ross & Modern Tapestry*. All direct quotations appearing here are from the book, unless otherwise noted. Titles of tapestries are italicized and set in quotation marks; titles of non-fiber artworks that served as models (maquettes) for tapestries are italicized.

Published in conjunction with the SOFA NEW YORK 2011 Lecture, *Tapestry Becomes Modern Art* featuring master weaver Archie Brennan, art critic Grace Glueck and author Ann Lane Hedlund. The lecture takes place Friday, April 15 at 3:00 pm and is followed by a book signing.

#### Bibliography

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<sup>1</sup> Although five tapestries in this edition were planned, only one was made (and this one, 84 by 68 inches, has not been located).

<sup>2</sup> Rita Reif, "Putting Down the Brush and Painting on a Loom," *New York Times*, 9/29/1972.

<sup>3</sup> A full set of five panels plus two artist's proofs were made in this edition between 1974 and 1977, each measuring 88 by 70 inches. The handling of signatures varied with each tapestry in the edition and required team meetings to clarify. It would take a separate essay to untangle the discussions and decision-making about this controversial aspect of production.

<sup>4</sup> Personal communication, Diana Mackown to Ann Hedlund via e-mail, 9/2/2010.