



# Searching for Tapestry's Identity: Gloria F. Ross as Tapestry Éditeur

by Ann Lane Hedlund

Gloria F. Ross poses in front of a GFR Tapestry designed by Robert Goodnough, New York, circa 1979. Photographer not identified.



"after *This Day*," 1982, after a painting by Helen Frankenthaler, woven by Janet L. Kennedy of the Kennedy/Kunstadt Workshop, 58 by 81 inches. To create this textured work, custom-dyed linen, cotton, wool, and rayon yarns were used on a multi-harness floor loom. Private collection (Peter and Aileen Godsick); © Helen Frankenthaler/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/Estate of Gloria F. Ross. Photograph by C. G. (not identified).

When Gloria Ross set out to translate Modernist paintings into fiber art through collaborative projects, she had two zealous goals: to express the individual artist's aesthetic intent and to create unique artworks in fiber. Never minding that these objectives could clash with each other, she proceeded to work for thirty-four years with well-known American and European painters who provided nearly one hundred designs for hooked rugs and woven tapestries. From the 1960s into the 1990s, her passion combined with the inspired handwork of several dozen hookers and weavers to produce 248 handmade wall hangings, known as the GFR Tapestries & Carpets.

When I began to write a book about Ross's self-fashioned career and this impressive body of work, I embarked on a journey of discovery—what propelled this woman to pursue her unusual career? How did negotiations with artists and artisans proceed? Who made decisions and who got credit for the work? How did those initial goals play out in each of the collaborations that developed? And ultimately, what does this work contribute to today's contemporary art and weaving worlds?

Fortunately, I had access to extensive archival materials for each project—letters, notes, sketches, photographs, and other records carefully saved by Ross.



As an anthropologist who studies living artists and their cultural heritage, I am most interested in the relationships and processes involved in producing artworks. Having firsthand accounts by the artists, weavers, and other contributors helped me to explore the motives and intricacies of each partnership. (Gloria Ross's business archives were bequeathed to the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.)

Born and bred in New York City, Gloria Frankenthaler (1923-1998) was a Mount Holyoke College graduate who majored in economics during the early 1940s. She married Arthur Ross, raised three children (Alfred, Beverly, and Clifford, named in alphabetical order), did needlework, and volunteered for charities. She was also a free spirit who undertook maverick projects. She did not have to work for a living, but took her professional life very seriously.

Working from home at first, she engaged her sister, the acclaimed Modernist painter Helen Frankenthaler, to design three needlepoint projects in the 1950s and five hooked rugs in the 1960s (a sixth came later). Her brother-in-law Robert Motherwell, a premier proponent of Abstract Expressionism, was the second artist whose paintings she adapted into fiber. After works designed by Frankenthaler and Motherwell were included in several New York exhibitions (and following her children's exodus to college and a divorce), Ross moved from hooking to handwoven tapestry in the European studio tradition. She ultimately worked with twenty-eight different artists and a nearly equal number of handweavers.

Over the course of her career, she oversaw the production of hooked rugs in New York from 1963 to 1976, handwoven Gobelins-style tapestries in Scotland from 1970 to 1980, Aubusson-style tapestries in France from 1971 to 1996, commercial pile carpet weaving in New York from 1973 to 1989, and Navajo-style and floor loom rug weaving in the American Southwest from 1979 to 1996.

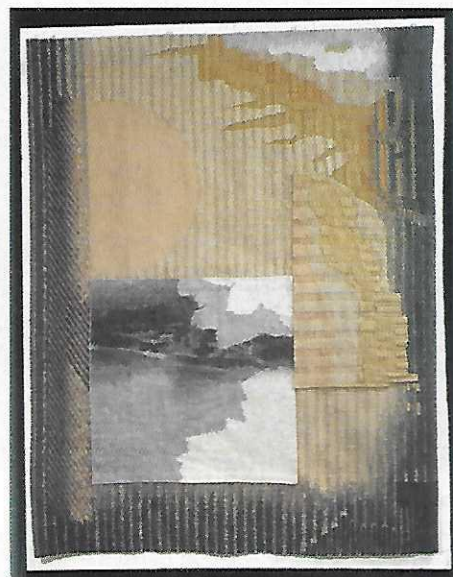
As an intermediary, Ross was called a tapestry *éditeur*, a little-known role in America that is well established in France. The job of an *éditeur* roughly parallels that of film producer—hiring a director and casting actors, financing, and promoting while contributing aesthetic and editorial decisions with a team of skilled moviemakers. So what specifically does a tapestry *éditeur* do?

**Selects artists and works.** Ross worked with famous artists whom she already knew, and with others who were recommended by her galleries. She sought out work that she felt would translate well, sometimes choosing extant paintings or collages and more often commissioning new work specifically for the translation. The latter resulted in maquettes of varied sizes and media ranging from rough sketches and schematics to finished paintings and collages.

**Chooses studios and weavers.** Ross established which style of weaving (Aubusson, Gobelins, Southwest, modified Swedish overshot, or others) would mesh best with a particular artist's work. She worked closely with established studios and independent weavers, developing extensive correspondence and, in most cases, long-term friendships.

**Establishes size and scale.** One of the most significant acts in interpreting a maquette is to decide what size is most effective visually, technically, and fiscally. Enlarging the artists' designs from model to full-scale cartoon and finished panel involved teamwork with Ross arbitrating, while specialists created the cartoon and wove the wall hangings.

**Negotiates color matches.** Working directly with weavers, dyers, and professional colorists, Ross had to visualize how colors change as yarn is woven into fabric. She served as go-between for the artists and weavers, with yarn



*"Landscape (within Landscape)," 1979, designed by Louise Nevelson, woven by Dovecot Studios, 82.5 by 63 inches. Nevelson made nine small mixed-media collages that were expressly intended for a series of unique GFR Tapestries (of which this is one). The weavers used wefts of wool, linen, metallic, synthetic, and other fibers and experimented with textured weaves, some of which were layered and appliquéd onto each other. Private collection; © Estate of Louise Nevelson/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph by Eric Pollitzer.*





A weaver at Manufacture Pinton works on a GFR Tapestry designed by Richard Anuszkiewicz, 1990. He is working from the back of the tapestry, in typical Aubusson fashion. Photograph by Gloria F. Ross.

samples and woven trials crossing the country or the Atlantic many times.

**Determines fibers and yarns.** Wool was the primary fiber in most cases, but Ross and the weavers occasionally chose to add cotton, linen, silk, and metallic (aluminized Mylar®) threads when different textures and reflectivity were desired.

**Works with galleries and clients.** GFR Tapestries & Carpets were sold through major galleries in New York, Chicago, Scottsdale, Houston, and other urban centers. Individual commissions were executed for corporate and private clients, often with participating

architects and designers.

**Promotes, promotes, promotes.** In conjunction with galleries, Ross gave lectures and interviews, proofread press materials, and constantly educated the public about the history and value of contemporary tapestry making. She championed textiles (not just tapestry) as fine art and was dedicated to bringing classic European tapestry to the United States, in contrast with the more sculptural Fiber Art Movement of the 1960s. Later in her career, she also became a crusader for contemporary Native American weaving.

In 1970, Ross visited the Edinburgh Tapestry Company where she met the master weaver Archie Brennan, who was then artistic director of the company's Dovecot Studios. From that time forward, Brennan served as a mentor and advocate for her projects designed by Frankenthaler, Motherwell, Jean Dubuffet, Robert Goodnough, Adolph Gottlieb, Louise Nevelson, Kenneth Noland, and Jack Youngerman. The studio weavers included Douglas Grierson, Maureen Hodge, Fiona Mathison, Fred Mann, Jean Taylor, and Harry Wright, with Dot Callendar, Gordon Brennan, and Neil McDonald. Brennan insisted on a team effort with credit for all involved.

At Brennan's suggestion, Ross explored contemporary French tapestry weaving in Aubusson and Felletin beginning in 1971. She brought many projects to the Manufacture Pinton, where unnamed staff weavers produced works designed by Richard Anuszkiewicz, Milton Avery, Romare Bearden, Stuart Davis, Frankenthaler, Goodnough, Hans Hofmann, Al Held, Paul Jenkins, Conrad Marca-Relli, Motherwell, Lucas Samaras, Ernest Trova, Frank Stella, and Jack

Youngerman. She also worked with the studios of Micheline Henry and Raymond Picaud on designs by Jenkins and Richard Lindner.

Two GFR Tapestries were woven by New York-based weavers who were influenced by the Swedish-American fiber artist Helena Hernmarck. Using versions of her modified overshot (rosepath) technique, Janet Kennedy and Carole Kunstadt produced a wall hanging after a Frankenthaler painting and Mollie Fletcher wove one after a painting by Clifford Ross.



"Falling Man/Canto T," 1972-81 (edition of seven plus artist's proof), designed by Ernest Trova, woven at Manufacture Pinton, dimensions averaged 84 by 84 inches. This tapestry was the first in which Ross asked the French weavers to use a metallic (aluminized Mylar®) weft for the figures. Cleveland Museum of Art, Washington University, St. Louis, and private collections; © 1972 The Trova Studios, LLC. Photograph by Al Mozell.



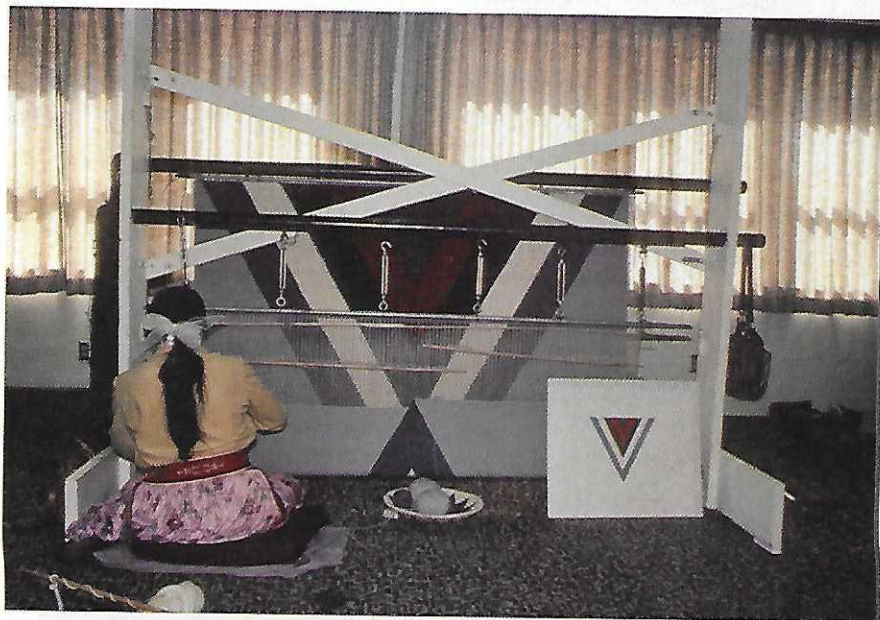
Intrigued by the ancient history of weaving in the American Southwest, Ross became determined to work with Native American weavers. From 1979 into the 1990s, she brought designs by painter Kenneth Noland to weavers in Arizona and New Mexico, producing twenty-five unique collaborative tapestries. Navajo weaver Mary Lee Begay excelled at Noland's chevron designs. Sadie Curtis wove Noland designs derived from classic Navajo chief blankets. Irene Clark specialized in vegetal-dyed colors and met the challenge of weaving a striped hanging more than nine feet wide. Rose Owens was a premier innovator in round rugs and worked from Noland's shaped canvases. Ramona Sakiestewa, of Hopi and German-American extraction, maintained a studio in Santa Fe where several weavers formed a team that wove on modern floor looms. She was responsible for a series of elegant pieces, including one with Churro wool.

Tapestry weaving today can involve a single designer who also weaves and performs all other tasks. Or tapestry can, as with GFR Tapestries & Carpets, engage many different people ranging from the designer, éditeur, studio director, and cartoon maker, to weavers, dyers, bobbin winders, fullers, shippers, installers, and marketers. Specialized craft labor is common in many parts of the world and has persisted for many centuries—the multi-person approach is nothing new. The esteemed and singular role of artist-weaver is, in fact, the relative newcomer during the twentieth century.

In her search for the identity of team-produced tapestry, Ross called her work “translations in fiber.” Others describe them as “interpretations” and “transformations.” Detractors might say “reproductions” or “crass copies,” but the intellectual, aesthetic, and technical processes required to produce a GFR tapestry belie such facile criticism. Furthermore, about half of the designs for GFR Tapestries & Carpets were made in sets (editions) of either five (if hooked) or seven (if handwoven) similar, if not identical, panels. Others, such as the Native American/Noland tapestries and the Dovecot/Nevelson collages, were unique pieces. The tradition of tapestry editions dates to the European Renaissance when art patrons commissioned multiples of a tapestry design. Other art traditions—printmaking, sculpture casting, and photography, for instance—also build on the creation of multiples, but tapestry weaving is the least able to be reproduced mechanically. In the case of GFR tapestries, creating an edition opened the door for artists to suggest changes midway through the process, thus further personalizing and deepening the results.

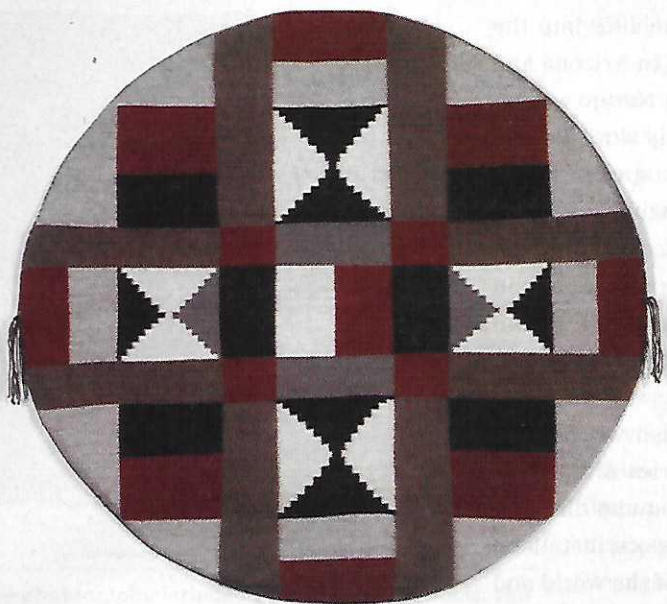
Why did Gloria F. Ross pursue this approach to fiber art? A rivalry with her famous artist-sister may have propelled her into an arts career; the relationship also provided her with initial connections to accomplished designers and galleries. A love for travel further encouraged her—in addition to Scotland and France, she explored projects in China, Australia, Turkey, Sweden, Portugal, and Spain. She relished the friendships that formed through her work. More than anything, her work emerged from an aesthetic impulse—Ross appreciated the expressive nature of tapestry weaving and wanted to share the classic European and Native American techniques with a broader American audience.

Gloria F. Ross successfully brought together art-making practices from different



Navajo weaver Mary Lee Begay works on “Nizhoni Peak,” with maquette by Kenneth Noland, 1980. Ross and Noland asked the Native American weavers to provide a title for each of the twenty-five singular tapestries made from Noland’s maquettes. Photograph by Ann Lane Hedlund.





"Games," 1982, designed by Kenneth Noland, woven by Rose Owens, 43 inch diameter. The weaver used a metal wagon wheel rim as her loom frame, with continuous uncut warps and selvage cords twined completely around the circumference. Private collection; © Estate of Kenneth Noland/Licensed by VAGA, New York.

cultural traditions, and the world is richer for her creative contributions. My new book, *Gloria F. Ross & Modern Tapestry*, documents and illustrates these complex projects, emphasizing the particular dynamics of each. Although the éditeur had a hand in all aspects of production, it remains the weavers' work that ultimately determines the quality of a translation.

*Ann Lane Hedlund is curator and professor of anthropology at Arizona State Museum, University of Arizona, Tucson, where she also directs the Gloria F. Ross Tapestry Program. A former student of Edna Blackburn (Caledon East, Ontario) during the early 1970s, she still tries to find time for spinning on an Icelandic upright wheel, dyeing with local plants, and weaving on a Swedish four-harness counter-balanced loom.*

*NOTE: All tapestries are unique works (not editions) unless otherwise noted. Titles of tapestries and carpets appear within quotation marks. Titles of tapestries and carpets made from original designs (maquettes) and titles of works in other media are italicized. Titles of tapestry and carpets made from another artwork are designated as "after Original Title."*



Ramona Sakiestewa, left, sits in her studio with weavers Candace Chipman and Rebecca Bluestone, Santa Fe, 1989. Sakiestewa studied art in Chicago and knew of the artists who designed GFR Tapestries & Carpets. Her involvement in the Native American/Noland project prompted the use of Churro sheep's wool that was spun at the cooperative Rio Grande Wool Mill in Tres Piedras, New Mexico. Photograph by Jack Parsons.