



AMERICAN TAPESTRY ALLIANCE

Working in Studios

Joan Baxter



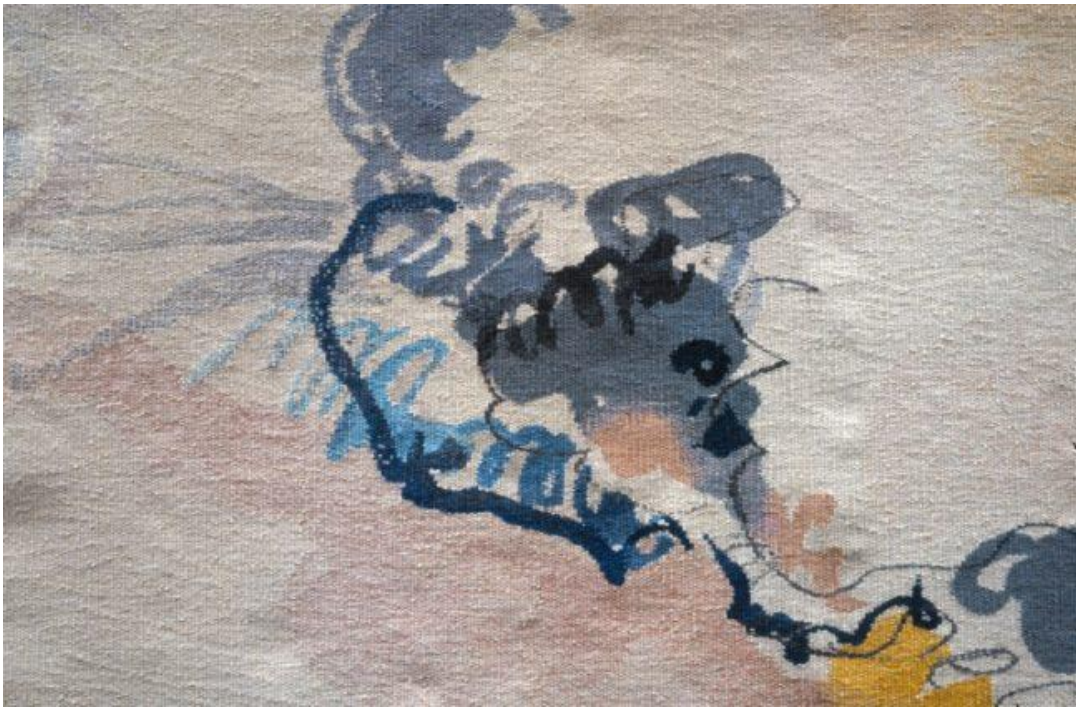
Joan Baxter, “Woven Monochrome Print”

I am very proud that I have supported my household through my tapestry activities for 40 years, an accomplishment not possible without skills learned and practised in studios. In a perfect world, aspiring tapestry weavers should spend at least a year working in a studio as part of their training.

Dovecot Studios, Edinburgh, 1974 and 1975

My work in weaving studios has been significant to my development as a tapestry weaver and artist. These experiences have allowed me to hone my technical and interpretive weaving skills, as well as to inform aspects of my approach to tapestry design. However, one important aspect of studio weaving which one can't really carry forward to working solo, is the intense pleasure gained through cooperation among two or more weavers working together creatively on the loom.

In 1974 at age 18, having just finished my first full year in the tapestry department at Edinburgh College of Art, I landed a summer holiday job at Dovecot Studios in Edinburgh. As tapestry students, we were taught the basics early in our first year; then it was up to us to learn or invent different ways to weave our own designs. Working as a studio weaver on someone else's design requires an entire spectrum of technical skills that I simply didn't possess then. I'm sure that my first days on the loom were very trying for the professional weavers with whom I worked, as they had to correct me all the time. They were endlessly kind and patient whilst muttering about "*You bloody students that dinnae ken how tae weave.*"



Joan Baxter, "Woven Watercolor Marks"

My first piece was a floor panel for Archie Brennan's tapestry of a stove. The piece's design was an enormous area of completely plain terracotta with a black and white tile border. I learned a great deal very quickly. On my first day, I had my first encounter with the baffling concept of sheds and was introduced to lazy lines. I was also taught how to wind bobbins and to use leashes. That day I learned three things most likely to annoy other weavers on the loom:

1. Never leave a shed problem for the next weaver to correct.
2. Always start or stop two bobbins together, never one on its own. Advice from Fred Mann, head weaver, when I looked very puzzled by this issue, was "*dinnae think about it, just dae it.*"

3. Always wind bobbins clockwise, with the head of the bobbin towards you, so that the weft comes off smoothly and easily (for a right-handed weaver).

All of these issues, I realised later, illustrate the collaborative nature of studio work and that it is a *business*, so every movement must be as efficient as possible; for example, manipulate warp with your left hand and weft with your right. Each studio weaver must have a certain standard of technical skill, so that no one could tell where one weaver left off and the next one took over. My experience of tapestry thus far had been much more about individual expression through art and design – the concept. Studio weaving at Dovecot Studios in those days was almost totally concerned with technical excellence – the medium.

I enjoyed working at Dovecot Studios and am very grateful to the weavers who generously taught me the technical skills necessary for my own work. Most tapestries woven there at that time were graphic rather than painterly, so when colours had been decided, there was very little leeway in weaving interpretation. As a result, I didn't think I wanted to be a career studio weaver, as it did not appear to satisfy individual creativity. During the 1970s, creative and experimental aspects of tapestry were very much to the fore in the woven work of artists such as Magdalena Abakanowicz and Sheila Hicks, and indeed the work of my tapestry tutor, Maureen Hodge.

West Dean Tapestry Studio, 1979–1984, 1985–1987

After two years of post-graduate study in Poland, working quite experimentally and with new materials and influences, I returned to the UK just when West Dean Tapestry Studio was recruiting weavers. I needed a job after seven years of studying, so I applied and was granted an interview. I will never forget the feeling as I walked into the tapestry studio on the first day of my two-day interview. The studio walls were lined with seven large pale tapestries from drawings by Henry Moore. They were simply the most beautiful tapestries I had ever seen. I couldn't believe that anyone could weave anything so complex and so subtle, and I desperately wanted to work there.



Joan Baxter, "Woven Paint"

To my surprise and delight, I got the job and began to work there in the autumn of 1979. This studio provided an entirely different way of working to learn. Up to that point, I had always worked from the front on an upright loom, and at that time we worked on low warp looms from the back. Then-director Eva-Louise Svensson traced our cartoons from full-size black and white photographs; these were pinned under the weaving for us to follow. All our yarns were dyed in-house, as it was impossible to buy the very pale and subtle colours required. We had the actual drawing on the loom to study and to match colours, and because we wove from the back, we had to reverse everything as we wove.

Because the drawings were very complex, requiring many different mixes, the back side of the weaving facing us was a forest of ends. To properly see what we had woven, once a week we used to wind back the weaving, lie under the loom on the pedals, and look up at our work. I was never convinced that weaving from the back was the best way to weave very complex pieces such as the Moore tapestries, so I switched to working from the front as soon as I could. We eventually acquired a 4m upright loom upon which the final Moore tapestry was woven.



Joan Baxter, "Woven Watercolor"

One very interesting aspect of West Dean occurred when Eva-Louse left the studio not long after I arrived. We no longer had a studio boss in overall charge of interpretation or of the production method during my time there. The weavers came from numerous traditions – Scandinavian, French, and Scottish, and brought a variety of approaches that we shared and used. Due to our workplace's non-hierarchical structure, we participated in every aspect of creating our tapestries, from choice of warp and sett and dyeing yarn, to creating the cartoon and weaving and finishing the tapestry.

I found that working on the Moore tapestries to be very challenging and totally absorbing. Here was a project that required weavers to analyse drawings, interrogate artist intentions, and translate all marks into tapestries that were larger versions of drawings, and yet at the same time were honest tapestries, definitely not weave-by-numbers copies. I gained enormous insight into how to mix and match not only colours but different densities and textures within colours. I learned to create transparent veils, to make lines dance and appear and disappear, and how to render different drawing and painting media into tapestry. Moore used many different media in his drawings, and we found ways of differentiating among chinagraph, pastel, and pencil lines, as well as how to weave the scatter of paint droplets resisting a wax crayon ground. The experience was an absorbing analytical process. Even today I catch myself

automatically analysing and simplifying a winter sky or a line of trees on the horizon into how I would weave it. The skill of interpretation is a very important gift that my work on these tapestries gave to my own tapestries later. At West Dean we built up a reputation for creative translation, and during my time there, we worked on tapestries made by other contemporary artists including John Piper and Howard Hodgkin. Every artist required a different approach, but for me, nothing was as difficult or as exciting as working on the Moore tapestries.



Joan Baxter, Work in Progress

Victorian Tapestry Workshops, 1984 – 1985

In 1984, I was invited to Australia to work for a year in the Victorian Tapestry Workshop, (now Australian Tapestry) originally to be part of the team that worked on the Canberra Parliament Tapestry, the second largest tapestry in the world. As it happened, the Parliament tapestry was delayed by a year, and instead I worked on several projects created by contemporary Australian artists. The studio at that time was a very large operation, employing 18 weavers and several trainees as well as a director and staff. There were usually as many as six very large looms in operation, with three or sometimes four weavers working on each one. It was very interesting to observe how projects were initiated, developed, and handled within this much more commercial environment. In contrast, at West Dean there were as many as four to eight of us, and we all performed almost every task, from negotiating with artists to cleaning the floor. I have to say that I did miss the autonomy; being *just a weaver* was hard to get used to. I was very

fortunate to work on a pair of tapestries designed by Merrill Dumbrell. She had been one of the founding weavers at VTW but left to work as an independent artist. When she received the commission for a pair of tapestries, each one 3.5m x 3.5m, she brought them to the studio, as they were too large for her to weave on her own. It was liberating to work alongside the designer, being able to discuss everything with her, and after reviewing what we had already woven, making small changes as we went along.



Joan Baxter, “Woven Gestures”

It was wonderful to weave something designed by a tapestry weaver who understood the native language of tapestry, what worked well, and what pushed the medium. It was a relief, after working from drawn and painted marks, to work from an outline cartoon on a design made up of easily woven shapes and a limited palette. It was also a great contrast; two of us weaving 10cm per week across a 2m loom at West Dean, compared to weaving 30 cm per week across 3.5m with two weavers and a trainee. Working with Merrill on her tapestries changed my attitude as to how I should design and continues to influence me to this day.

I loved the boldness of Australian designs woven in the studio. Without the weight of hundreds of years of Western art history, there was room for playfulness and lack of pomposity that reflected the Aussie character, something we wouldn't get away with in Europe. However, my favourite pieces woven in the studio at that time were the somewhat contentious tapestries woven from Aboriginal paintings. Mark-making translates very appropriately to a woven

vocabulary, although it is a little complex and fiddly to weave. The results are incredibly powerful and beautiful artworks. When I travelled to the centre of Australia after I had finished working, I understood that what I saw in the tapestries was a true and multi-layered representation of landscape, as a history, a map, a creation myth, a love story to the landscape, and much, much more that is unknown to me, as it is not my culture. This understanding helped me to work in such a multi-layered way with my own landscapes later.

I returned to West Dean for an additional two years, but was already working towards becoming an independent artist, taking on extra weaving work for Marta Rogoyska in my spare time. I was increasingly feeling that many studio-woven designs were not appropriate to the medium, and I became tired of weaving drawn and painted marks, no matter how complex, just because I could. The last piece upon which I worked on at West Dean was Henry Moore's famous *Shelter* drawing. Mr Moore died during the weaving; I knew that I'd never weave anything that difficult in the studio again, and that it was time to stop my work as a full-time studio weaver. I knew that I had things to say in tapestry that didn't include copying paintings by non-tapestry artists.



Joan Baxter, "Woven Watercolor Marks"

During the early self-employment years, I was helped enormously by my studio experience. I was able to take on more weaving projects for Marta. She had more commissions that she could physically weave, and she knew that she could give me the design, warp, and undyed yarn, and that I would produce the finished tapestry to her standards and on time. I was also able to undertake custom dyeing for several artists and projects. It all helped to keep my head above water financially during the first six or seven crucial years of my solo career.

In the early 2000s, I very briefly returned to studio weaving for the Hunt of the Unicorn Tapestries in progress at Stirling Castle. I have enormous respect for the weavers who re-created this magical set of tapestries; the skill set they developed to weave them is truly awesome.

I was twice asked to fill in when the regular weavers were on holiday. This opportunity was an unmissable chance to get under the skin of medieval weavers who wove the original tapestries, now in the Metropolitan Museum in New York. The new tapestries are a little smaller and much coarser than the originals. We had full-size colour photographs of the originals divided into sections by the loom to study, but due to size and sett difference, we couldn't simply copy exactly what the medieval weavers had done. Instead, we had to simplify without losing the meaning. It was fascinating to study the originals in great detail to see exactly how everything had been woven, then figuring out how to do it well with far fewer warps.

From time to time, one got a fleeting sense of the long-dead weaver's personality through his/her work approach, a rare treat indeed, the feeling of continuity of our wonderful medium sent to us down the centuries almost unchanged.

Unfortunately, I am not able to show full images of any tapestries upon which I worked, as the artists hold image copyrights, and half of those weavers are no longer with us. I have however, supplied some close details, my own images of sections that I wove, without identifying their source. These detailed sections are simply meant to illustrate some techniques that I used to translate marks and lines from painted or drawn sources.

Joan Baxter, June 2019

Web links for weaving studios mentioned in these article.

- www.dovecotstudios.com
- <http://www.henry-moore.org/visit/henry-moore-studios-gardens/studios-and-tapestries/the-aisled-barn>, from the Henry Foundation, also images on Pinterest
- www.austapestry.com.au
- www.westdean.org.uk, follow the link to West Dean Tapestry Studio
- www.stirlingcastle.scot, click on The Stirling Tapestries to find a lovely short video. Additional information and pictures can be found on Wikipedia and Pinterest

JOAN BAXTER

Joan Baxter was born in Edinburgh and now lives in the far north of Scotland. After studying tapestry at Edinburgh College of Art and Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts in Poland, she worked in commercial tapestry studios in Scotland, England, and Australia. Joan has been an independent professional artist for more than 30 years, making personal and commissioned tapestries, mostly at large scale. She has exhibited her work extensively in the UK and worldwide. Her tapestries are included within private and corporate collections. Committed to raising awareness and passing on skills, she teaches and lectures regularly in the UK, Europe, and North America.