



AMERICAN TAPESTRY ALLIANCE

## Weaving Mark Adams Designs

Phoebe McAfee

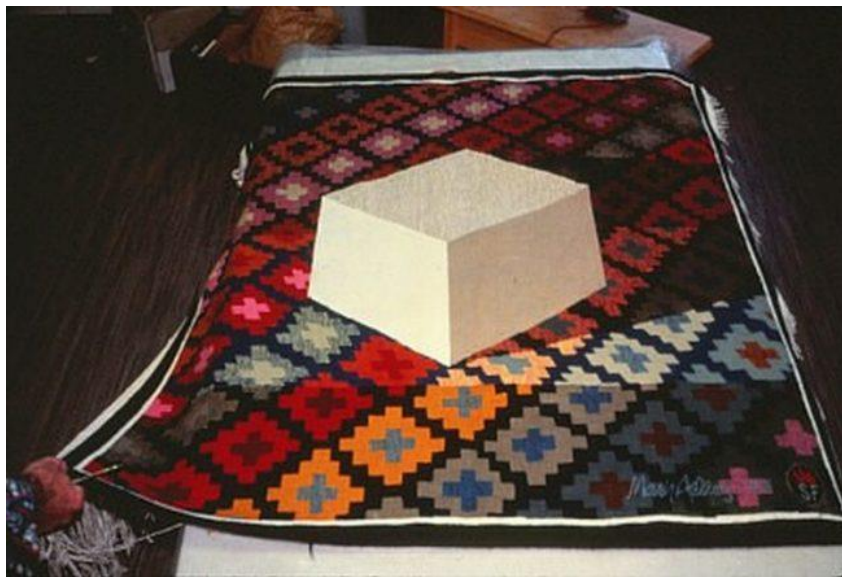


Mark Adams and Phoebe McAfee at San Francisco Tapestry Workshop after cutting off “Pond in the Golden Gate Park”, 1981.

In 1976, the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco mounted an exhibit of tapestries, with Anna Bennett as curator. The show was entitled *Five Centuries of Tapestry*, including many examples in the museum’s collection, and *The Story of Jacob*, a cycle of large tapestries on loan from Belgium. Anna Bennett wrote a book about the exhibit, *Five Centuries of Tapestry*, published by The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and Chronicle Books. At the time, I was a student in the textiles graduate program at San Francisco State University. Twelve students signed on to a project at the Legion of Honor Museum to weave a traditional Aubusson tapestry in the rotunda, before the public. Jean-Pierre Larochette was a visiting professor in the textile department.

He built an Aubusson low-warp loom, and local designer Mark Adams agreed to design a small tapestry, *California Poppies*, for us to weave. Mark Adams had studied with Jean Lurcat in Aubusson, France in the 1950s, learned how to design cartoons for tapestry, and employed tapestry weavers there for many years. We all thought the project to be educational but held out little hope that we would finish the tapestry during the six-month exhibit, or that the finished piece would measure up to tapestry standards. I had never woven Aubusson tapestry, and learned at the loom while speaking to visitors as if I knew what I was doing. After six months, we all had improved our skills and finished the piece. As we cut the piece from the loom, we were surprised that it looked good, and Mark was pleased as well.

This experience led some of us to create the San Francisco Tapestry Workshop. Jean-Pierre Larochette became the director, and Ernestine Bianchi, Ruth Tanenbaum, and I became its founders and instructors. Our first tapestry together, as we still had the loom at San Francisco State, was Mark's *White Block*. In 1977, we rented a studio in San Francisco's Noe Valley and began to weave and teach. Our first big project, six tapestries, was created for Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*.



Mark Adams woven by San Francisco Tapestry Workshop  
“White Block”, 1977  
52" x 44", 13 portee, Cotton Warp & Wool Weft.

Mark Adams designed more projects for us to weave. He lived in a restored firehouse just a few blocks away and could easily visit. In 1981, the City and County of San Francisco

commissioned Mark to design three large tapestries for the San Francisco Airport, with Rudi Richardson and myself as the weavers. We wove the first tapestry at the workshop, then moved to a studio at Bethany Methodist Church to complete the series. The project took three years; the set is now permanently installed in Terminal Two at the San Francisco Airport. These projects led to 20 additional years of weaving Mark's designs. Rudi and I wove at the church studio until 1990, when I moved to my home studio.

What is it like to weave another person's designs? At the beginning, Mark would bring a new design to the workshop, we would decide upon a warp sett, choose all the colors, and work with Mark on details: coordinating hatching and hachures, best ways to define shapes and shading, how to interpret the cartoon. When he sent his previous cartoons to France, he had no say in incorporating these details, and sometimes he was surprised with their choices. Now, with his weavers close by, we could weave samples of color and detail for each tapestry, an enriching collaboration for all of us.

During the airport project, Mark designed and painted the cartoon on the firehouse's large wall. As Aubusson tapestry is woven from the back and on the side, we traveled to his studio and traced over the image, reversed the tracing, redrew the design on fresh paper, and painted it in, using Mark's tempera paint that he had mixed for us. Each day we filled in areas and returned the next day to find that Mark had refined the design with hachures and other changes until he got it just the way he liked. With the cartoon finished and color bundles mixed to Mark's liking, we warped the loom and began to weave. At that point the weavers were in charge, although Mark was just a phone call away to discuss changes.

Each day, I clocked in and out of the loom, kept a logbook, worked 30 hours a week, six hours a day, ordered the yarn needed for each piece (dye lots are important), and spent another month finishing after we cut off the tapestry. We sewed slits, steam-pressed, turned back edges, and attached the hanging apparatus. In 1987, Rudi and I wove a large piece for a Minneapolis office building and traveled with Mark and his wife, Beth Van Hoesen, to install it.

Many of Mark's works were designed on commission; others were on spec, and sometimes we wove them in editions. After four in an edition, the cartoon was retired. Those that I wove more than once were fun, as you make different choices each time you weave; while they appear to be the same, the weaver can spot the changes. As I wove alongside Rudi, I could tell which

one of us wove certain areas. We had to be compatible in our weaving styles, and after some time it was difficult to tell.

The last new design I wove for Mark was *Lilith*, woven for Anna Bennett in 1991, a full-length figure of a woman and my first try at weaving a human figure. The very last tapestry for Mark was a repeat of *Pond in Golden Gate Park*, the first and smallest of the three airport tapestries. It was secret commission, woven during the entirety of 2001. Mark had passed away in 2005. However, the secret was not divulged until 2012, when we held an exhibit and symposium at the San Jose Museum of Quilts and Textiles that featured many Mark Adams tapestries. *Lilith* and many others that we had woven were on display. What follows is the story.



Mark Adams woven by Phoebe McAfee  
“Lilith”, 1991

30" x 78", 13 portee. Cotton warp, wool weft.

The three tapestries were hung in the United Airlines airport terminal until October 1989, when an earthquake damaged the San Francisco area. The tapestries were not damaged, but the room had sustained plaster cracks. The art commission removed the tapestries and stored them for safekeeping in the de Young Museum.





Cutting off "Lilith", 1991. Mark Adams, Anna Bennett, Phoebe McAfee.

In 1994, the Moscone Center, San Francisco's convention center, opened a new grand ballroom, and the tapestries were temporarily installed there. They looked beautiful hung in that location, and I took many visitors there to view them. In 2000, someone walked into the ballroom and ripped the smallest one (8 x 10 feet) from the wall and walked off. The other two tapestries were immediately taken down and stored in an undisclosed location, kept safe from further harm.



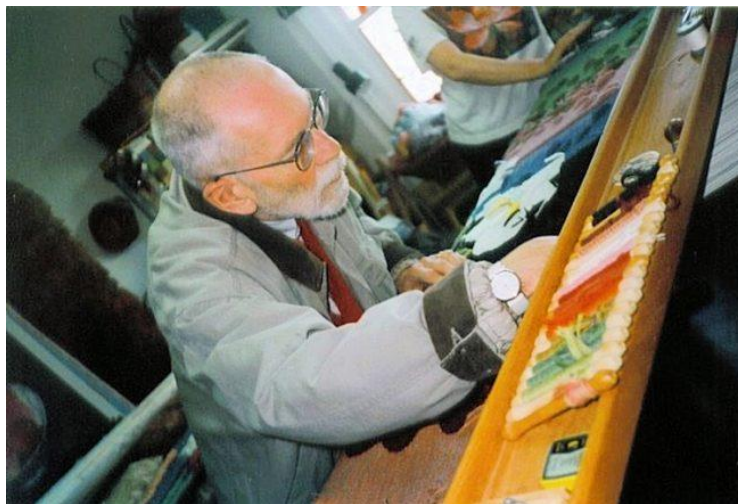
Mark Adams woven by Phoebe McAfee  
"Pond in Golden Gate Park", 1991  
84" x 96", 11 portee.

Mark called me and asked if my loom was free. I had recently cut a piece from it, and the loom was empty. There are not many eight-foot looms in the Bay Area, and no weavers with my history with Mark's work. I asked about the commission, and Mark replied that I must tell no one until we finished. He didn't even tell his wife. He informed me as to the theft and mentioned that the art commission would be in serious trouble if it became known that a valuable art piece was stolen from a public installation.

I asked if he still had the cartoon. YES. I asked if he still had the woven color samples from the piece. Yes. He asked if I still had the chart with color codes to coordinate with the cartoon. Yup.

It had been 20 years since we had woven the piece, and it was remarkable that we had kept all that we needed. I warped the loom, ordered the yarns, and began to weave. I locked my studio door when not working and invited no one in during that year. I did tell my husband, who created a large United States map for my studio wall to cryptically mark my progress across the tapestry. We traced a line from San Francisco to New York, and when he or Mark inquired as to the piece's progress, I replied, "Utah" or "Nebraska." When I reached the end, Mark visited with members of the art commission. We cut it off, I finished it, and Mark took it home to present to Beth, who was only then informed of the replacement.

Not long before the 2012 exhibit at the San Jose venue, a woman contacted Mark Adams' estate to say that she had a large Mark Adams tapestry for sale. A police sting was set up and recovered the original tapestry, in good shape after 12 years. The replacement had already been installed in the new airport location, so the original was included in the San Jose exhibit. We told the story of the theft and recovery at the symposium. Rudi Richardson's sister worked in the de Young Museum's conservation lab, and she disclosed that they had been aware of this story for a while.



Mark Adams cutting off "Pond in Golden Gate Park #2," 2001

Working on another person's designs throughout many years, especially with a talented and gracious designer, was a rewarding career for a tapestry weaver; not much money by American standards but spiritually rewarding. I learned so much that has improved my own design capabilities and my confidence. The experience has been a good way to spend my middle years and created wonderful memories for my later years as a tapestry weaver. I now weave

with the Damascus Fiber Arts School weavers, mostly my own designs. I recently cut off a small piece designed by an old friend, so my collaboration continues.

**Author:** Phoebe McAfee, 75, has been weaving since 1967. She lived in San Francisco from 1970 to 2010 and now resides in Portland, Oregon. She has a Bachelor of Arts in sculpture from Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas (her hometown) and a Master of Arts in textiles from San Francisco State University. Phoebe's loom is a Shannock eight-foot Aubusson-style tapestry loom.