

Unknown its name, unmatched its color.

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I came to know Sheila Hicks's work rather late in her career. I met her in person only once, a few years ago.

The moment we met, Hicks was there as if she were a teacher I had known forever. She smiled and began firing off questions that went straight to the heart of my work (I had given her postcards of my pieces). When I showed confusion, she would say, "You see," and begin to spin out narratives as if she were weaving the vast world that lay behind her questions.

We were in a gallery where her work was on display, along with several books documenting her practice. Instantly, my eyes were opened—it was a revelation. Here was the teacher—the mentor—I must have been learning from all along. Even though I had never actually studied with her, Hicks was my teacher.

The thrill and joy of finally meeting the teacher who should have existed—who absolutely must have been there all along.

1

Textile is the most fundamental technology shaping human culture. Just as warp and weft are interlaced to create cloth, diverse elements are integrated to generate a whole. This mode of thinking became the foundation not only for clothing, art, and architecture, but also for mathematics and the description of things, serving as a guide for understanding space and a key to urban organization.

Textiles have governed and attuned people's hearing, touch, vision, and action. It was textiles that connected music and literature with art and architecture. They were the fabric—the very fabric—of our synesthesia, the maternal matrix that wove experience into lived memory. Textile is the mother of the arts. Even without writing, textiles functioned as script; without maps, they became maps; they served as tangible scores for architectural design, music, dance, and human endeavor. This multifunctionality of textiles has been recognized since ancient times in the histories of art and architecture. Adolf Loos (1870–1933), the Viennese architect who laid the groundwork for modern architecture, understood this: it was not that textiles decorated architectural interiors—rather, the roles were reversed, the primary and secondary inverted. The textile that envelops the human body was primary, and architecture was merely the support structure for it.

Loos articulated this insight at the beginning of the twentieth century. (Or one might say that the essence of the avant-garde as manifested in Dada was to ground art in everyday life—thus it was fundamentally connected to craft techniques that had been regarded as peripheral. It was, one could say, a method drawn precisely from sewing and weaving: dismantling the present moment, unraveling it, cutting it apart, and stitching it back together.)¹

Sheila Hicks is recognized as the pivotal artist who decisively positioned textiles at the center of artistic expression. Hicks studied painting and design fundamentals with Josef Albers (1888–1976) at Yale University, and through him met Anni Albers (1899–1994). Anni Albers was a theorist who studied as a student at the Weimar Bauhaus and later taught at the Dessau Bauhaus alongside her partner Josef Albers, and subsequently at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. She theorized weaving beyond its positioning as craft, discussing it as "The Pliable Plane" and positioning it as a matrix—a maternal matrix—for spatial construction that flexibly embraces and organizes color and tactility.

The Bauhaus held that the various arts such as painting and sculpture should be fundamentally reintegrated from the ground up through craft techniques like weaving. This ideal resonated with the practices and intellectual currents of contemporary avant-garde artists—who positioned textiles as integrating body, space, and temporality—and sought to systematize them.

(Incidentally, Eva Hesse [1936–1970] was one of the few other female students who studied with Josef Albers at Yale during the same period as Hicks, and the work of Hicks and Hesse's generation inherited the thinking of avant-garde figures such as Taeuber-Arp and Anni Albers, developing their possibilities into more grounded work that unlocked and transcended the formal stagnation of Minimal Art. [This is the essence of what is called Post-Minimalism.] It was, one could say, an attempt to place at the heart of art the process of making—weaving together material and body, sensation and spirit—in resistance to geometric, impersonal, and conceptual forms. Thus, Sheila Hicks is an artist who legitimately inherited the recognition—rediscovered in the early twentieth century and systematized through Dada and the Bauhaus—that textiles are the maternal matrix of art integrating body, space, and temporality, and who developed and embodied this understanding to its

¹ Sophie Taeuber-Arp (1889–1943), who studied at the School of Applied Arts in the same Vienna where Loos was active, positioned textiles as a technology rhythmically connecting body and world, being herself a dancer. (She was one of the founders of Dada.)

furthest extent.)

Hicks's practice of collecting and reinterpreting textile techniques from around the world reconnected art to everyday life through the traces of handwork and cultural memory, unfolding as a project linking global art with local craft. In this sense, Hicks's significance lies in her being an artist-as-researcher who studied under the art historian George Kubler (1912–1996), whose work fundamentally transformed the framework of art theory from the 1960s onward, inheriting his view of history through objects—the idea that objects themselves continuously regenerate objects, thereby transmitting culture. Kubler's **The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things** (1962) presented a perspective that viewed artworks not as the creations of genius but as sequences and chains generated by objects themselves. This theory proved particularly effective in studying Central and South American cultures that developed recording systems other than writing, such as the khipu (knotted cords of the Inca and other Andean cultures). At Yale, under Kubler, Hicks deeply researched the textile cultures positioned at the core of Andean South American cultures, and learned their techniques firsthand in the field. From the 1960s onward, she expanded this into practical research on textile cultures worldwide, including Mexico, Japan, India, and Morocco. For Hicks, textiles are precisely these sequences of objects—an endless process of becoming in which thread calls to thread, color generates color, and form chains into form.

"Textiles had been relegated to a secondary role in our society, to a material that was considered either functional or decorative. I wanted to give it another status and show what an artist can do with these incredible materials" (Sheila Hicks, 2004, interview from Archives of American Art).

Though she puts it somewhat modestly, textiles were in fact the primary technology that wove human culture together—quite literally, like a textile.

2

On the day I arrived in Paris in October 2021, I visited the Frank Elbaz Gallery. It was to prepare for my solo exhibition at his booth at FIAC, which would open in a few days. Six months earlier, during the pandemic, I had held a solo show at the same gallery. Now, in that large room, a major installation by Sheila was being prepared. On the work table in the reception room beside it, about fifteen boxes of my works—what I call the Zero Thumbnail Series—were already stacked.

I noticed—Sheila's **minimes** series was displayed on the wall of that same room! Sheila calls these "minimes"—her little ones. I knew of their existence but had never seen them in person. I was now directly encountering this series of small works, each roughly twenty by thirty centimeters. I was

profoundly moved. Each small woven piece exuded an entirely different expression and presence, evoking, quite literally, a place through which wind passes. They embodied the ideal of my own small works stacked beside them—TOPICA PICTUS, the very memory of place.

Hicks began exploring this trajectory of work in the mid-1950s. Here lay the core of a practice that would later detach from the wall, take on various forms and become freestanding, or expand to such a scale as to utterly transform the very perception of architecture.

The impressions of places visited, things encountered, events experienced—all are woven in as texture, as the thickness of air, as a synesthetic medium between material and color that transmits or absorbs light, even incorporating their transitions. Constructed on portable support frames, threads of varying thickness, color, and texture become three-dimensional entities, piercing through the surface quality of painting, dissolving the hardness of sculpture into atmosphere, and generating spaces that expand and contract like breathing. In this sense, these small weavings become a medium that breaks through the limits of painting, sculpture, and architecture.

3

But wait—is this not *kotonoha* (言の葉)—a language that requires no literacy, that operates without letters—in other words, a narrative? A medium that brings together people who have never met.

I suddenly recalled the pouch-like nests woven by tailorbirds. These birds, which inhabit the tropical forests of Asia (the region stretching from the Indian subcontinent to Southeast Asia), unravel plant fibers drawn from nature with their beaks to make thread, or use thread re-twisted from spider silk, employing their beaks like needles to sew leaves together and construct nests. It's as if someone's handmade fashionable pouch were hanging from a tree. Such was the reverie that came to mind.

A person walking through the forest had their pouch caught on a tree and left behind. The tailorbird saw it and learned the design. Or conversely—a person walking through the forest found a nest suspended from a tree. "Oh, what a lovely pouch. Made entirely from natural materials." And thus learned the design. No doubt the tailorbird regarded it as something made by a bird, while the human regarded it as something made by a human.

But either way, the pouch succeeded in communicating across the boundary between bird and human, and pouches spread across the earth, transcending species. Textiles are *kotonoha* (言の葉), and they are seeds. The Japanese word *kotonoha* means "words" or "language," but literally

translates as koto (言/事)—things, matters, events—and ha (葉)—leaves, foliage, fragments. Thus textiles are the leaves of words, the foliage of things: language that requires no letters, narratives woven into form.

This is confirmed in world myths and legends.

For instance, the word *tanabata* itself means "weaving loom," and was connected to the myth of the *tanabata-tsume* (loom maiden) who wove garments to offer to the gods by the seashore or riverside. In Japan too, textiles have functioned since ancient times as wordless language. The gestures of weaving, the rhythmic sounds produced—these already spun narratives. The Toshikage clan in *The Tale of Utsubo* and Princess Chūjō, whose story is preserved in the founding legend of Taima-dera Temple, were both masters of weaving and simultaneously virtuosos of music. It is said they possessed the ability to master all arts and absorb foreign cultures without learning through writing.

Thus textiles have played the role of medium connecting this shore and the far shore, the human world and the otherworld, at the shoreline where cultures meet. The act of spinning thread and interlacing warp and weft was dialogue with the invisible world, a technique of transmission beyond words.

Let me conclude with the legend of the "Feather Robe" (*Hagoromo*), set on the shores of Suruga Bay.

*What marvel is this robe? Taking it in hand, the sleeves are fragrant—blossoms, or something else?
Unknown its name, unmatched its color.*

—Noh play *Hagoromo*, author unknown (attributed by some to Zeami), from the lost text of
Tango-no-kuni Fudoki, Hagoromo (Celestial Feather Robe) legend

What the fisherman found on a pine branch was a single piece of cloth. Taking it in hand, a fragrance rose from the sleeves—neither quite flower nor anything else—a robe of matchless color, as if brought back from the moon capital, wondrously beautiful. Fluttering in the wind, it was light as cloud, as if floating in the sky. Who could have forgotten such a feather robe? Surely they will return for it.

The heart of this tale lies in this scene. The reason this light robe hanging on the pine branch stands out so vividly is, needless to say, the contrast with the majestic Mount Fuji towering behind it.

The fisherman who found the feather robe tries to take it home. A celestial maiden appears and pleads: without the robe she cannot return to heaven. She will dance if he returns it. The maiden dances, the robe is returned to her, and she ascends to heaven.

Thus time flows onward. The celestial robe stirs in ocean winds. Trailing, trailing across Miho's pines. Ukishima like drifting clouds, Ashitaka's slopes, Fuji's sovereign peak—all fading into the vault of heaven. Vanishing within the mist.

(ibid.)

The feather robe trails in the wind, and that trailing continues like mist from Miho's pine grove across the vast beaches of Suruga Bay. In the movement created by the endlessly trailing robe, even that Mount Fuji becomes invisible and vanishes.

In 1992, Sheila Hicks created a tapestry relief woven in linen for the Fuji City Cultural Center Rose Theater. This monumental work, titled "Four Seasons of Fuji," stands 2.6 meters high and stretches 103 meters in length—a dimension that earned it a place in the Guinness Book of Records. Its theme was surely not, of course, the vertically towering Fuji. Nor was it the ephemeral feather robe set against the landscape.

It was the chromatic haze, the woven forms, the very weather patterns trailing across the vast Suruga Bay stretching endlessly onward—all spun out, as if breathing, by the feather robe. The coloring of climate—Color Climates.