

**RAM Collects: Polish Fiber Art from Camille and Alex Cook**

October 18, 2015 – February 7, 2016

Nuanced in different ways and affected by various cultural changes, fiber art produced over the last 50 years has reflected artists' interests in exploring the limits of materials, challenging technique and construction, reflecting social and personal issues, and expanding the definition of what fiber art means today.

Since the 1970s, Lodz, Poland—the historical site of a significant textile industry—has been the home for a triennial exhibition of fiber-related work by almost 150 artists from over 50 countries. This survey of innovative fiber from across the globe significantly impacts the artists of the host country, as well as those further afield.

This **RAM Collects** exhibition highlights over 25 works from Polish artists, pieces recently gifted to the collection by **Camille and Alex Cook**. Included in the gift are **Grażyna Brylewska-Pędzialek, Maria Teresa Chojnacka, Barbara Gałan, Lilla Kulka, Andrzej Rajch, and Jolanta Rudzka-Habisiak**.

Poland experienced a dramatic shift in the late twentieth century as it transformed from a communist regime to a democracy. Living in a country that was experiencing intense social and political change, artists were self-consciously making work that reflected personal interests and that expanded upon—or deviated from—more traditional modes of working

Challenged with material limitations, Polish fiber artists embraced the possibilities of atypical materials, innovative techniques, and/or compelling content. Traditional processes, such as weaving or knotting, served as the groundwork for thoughtful experimentation. Artists felt free to explore more abstract concepts while playing with material properties and dynamic compositions.

Poland has a long history of textile production and design. Centered in the city of Lodz for most of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, textile manufacturing has been a large part of Poland's history, and extends back to traditional modes of weaving. Made of woven wool, hemp, and flax—and sometimes including cotton embroidery—traditional Polish textiles are made in a variety of designs associated with different cultural localities within the country. They include both functional works (like the striped aprons of the central Polish Pasiaki style) and decorative objects.

Source: <http://museum.msu.edu/s-program/mtap/Collections/polish.html>

Several of the artists featured in this exhibition were educated at the Academy of Fine Arts in Lodz including **Boleslaw Tomasziewicz** and **Włodzimierz Cygan**. Poland's Central Museum of Textiles is also located in Lodz, in a building that was once a textile factory.

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The artists in this exhibition came of age in an era marked by innovations in traditional craft mediums and pop art influences, giving their art a graphic quality. Yet these artists were also formulating their early artistic styles in the politically repressive atmosphere of Soviet-controlled Poland. They look back as well as forward utilizing traditional materials in new ways. Made of jute, wool, and cotton, their works play with “old materials” to create new meanings, often through the use of strong textural components and three-dimensional, purely decorative forms.

“Weavers selected suitable materials, according to their needs, and improvised on the looms’ textile effects, disregarding the traditional rigors of wall hanging technique. They painted with fibers...” (Jolanta Piwońska, Central Museums of Textiles in Lodz, *Polish Fiber Art at the Threshold of the 21st Century*.)

Reflecting the drive for innovation, **Maria Teresa Chojnacka**, has embroidered the date and material on the back of each piece, where she also emphasizes that the wool weavings were created with her “own technique.” Yet, her pieces are numbered rather than written titled, a possible nod to the replicative work of nineteenth century textile manufacturing and the later Soviet desire for large scale production. **Grażyna Brylewska-Pędzialek’s** piece *My Grandmother’s Shawl* recalls a traditional garment yet the material is presented in a non-functional shape and is encased in plastic—a modern means of preservation.

Many of the works’ titles, such as *My World*, *Quicksand*, and *Angel of Hope*, speak to Poland’s history as well as its political future, as most of the pieces here were constructed during the decline and subsequent fall of the Soviet regime. Some artists however, look inward. Brylewska-Pędzialek frequently replicates her own face, as in the work *By Myself Alone*, featured in the exhibition. This piece is an examination of artist as maker and subject.

The “miniature” format of many of these works is “an important area of activity for Polish artists,” as it “reflects the artistic conceptions but allows for easier execution.” Miniatures act as almost a sketch and due to the format’s popularity among Polish fiber artists, Poland is the host of the *International Baltic Mini Textile Triennial* (Gdynia, Poland) as well as the *International Triennial of Tapestry*, which is held in Lodz. The longest running textile conference in the world, the triennial is now in its fifteenth incarnation.

Central museum in Lodz: <http://www.muzeumwlokiennictwa.pl/>

Artist resumes: <http://www.biennale.xq.pl/2Artysci.html>

International Friends of Fiber: <http://www.friendsoffiberart.org/where-all.php>

About the Artists

Grażyna Brylewska-Pędzialek (1950-) is currently a professor at the Art Institute of Pedagogical Studies at the University of Krakow where she currently teaches drawing and painting. She is the co-founder of gallery BB in Krakow and has participated in international fiber exhibitions around the world.

Source: www.muzeumwlokiennictwa.pl/do_pobor/10.pdf

Maria Teresa Chojnacka (1931-) was born in Warsaw and graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw in 1956. Between 1964 and 1967, Chojnacka worked at the Institute of Industrial Design. Since 1979, she has been teaching weaving techniques at Volkschule Berachah (Riss, Germany). Chojnacka has participated in over 329 exhibitions.

Source: www.krosno24.pl

Włodzimierz Cygan (Vladimir Gypsy) (1953-) was born in Lodz, Poland. Between 1974 and 1980, he studied industrial design at the Academy of Fine Arts in Lodz. In 2002, Cygan became a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts. In 2008, he began working as the laboratory manager for the Department of Textile Printing at the Fashion Academy of Fine Arts. Cygan has participated in over 140 exhibitions, including nearly 30 individual exhibitions in Poland and abroad. He won the Grand Prix at the 12th International Triennial of Tapestry in Lodz in 2007.

Source: www.cyganart.com/#!art_1

Emilia Cecylia Domańska (1948-) is both a watercolorist and textile artist, who attended the Academy of Fine Arts in Ponzan, Poland where she studied interior design and graduated in 1973. In 1996, Domańska won 3rd prize at the Fifth National Watercolor Triennale in Lublin and in 1997 she won the Grand Prix at the Third International Biennial of Miniature Textiles Baltic Sea. In 2008, Domańska received the scholarship of the Ministry of Culture.

Source: www.krosno24.pl

Kazimiera Frymark-Błaszczuk (1931-) attended the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Torun, Poland and the Academy of Fine Arts in Lodz. She is now a professor of undergraduate courses at Nicolaus Copernicus University. Her works have been shown in over 300 group exhibitions, including 40 solo shows, and can be found in several public and private collections in Poland, Germany, Mexico, the USA, Sweden, Italy, and Hungary.

Source: www.krosno24.pl

Barbara Gałan graduated in 1978 from the Academy of Fine Arts in Lodz where she studied textiles and clothing. Her works can be found in the Central Textile Museum in Lodz, the Textile Centre in Chicago, in Zacatecas, Mexico, in Szombathely, Hungary, and in various private collections. She has participated in many prestigious exhibitions in Poland and abroad.

Source: www.krosno24.pl

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Anna Goebel (1951-) graduated from the Poznan Academy of Fine Arts in 1977. She is currently a professor at her alma mater. Goebel has won various awards, including the Minister's Award for Culture and Arts. Her works are exhibited in museums and private collections in and outside of Poland.

Source: www.ilanagoormuseum.org/eng/artist/Anna-Goebel/

Bozena Kaluga (1960-) is the youngest of the Polish fiber artists featured in this exhibition. In 1977, she received the UNESCO special award for drawing. Beginning in 1980, Kaluga studied at the Academy of Art in Poland. She received her graduate degree in fiber art and sculpture in 1985. Both a 2D and 3D artist, her pen and ink drawings and her fiber works have been exhibited all over the world.

Source: kaluga.moonfruit.com/#/biography/4508794267

Lilla Kulka (1946-) was born in Krakow, Poland. She attended the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow, studying industrial design from 1965 to 1968, and then went on the State Higher School of Fine Arts in Poznan where she studied painting, graphics, and sculpture. Kulka graduated with honors in 1972. From 1981 to 2000, she was a professor of painting at the Academy of Fine Arts. Kulka went on to become the head of Laboratory of Tapestry until 2009 when she began teaching design at the Higher Technical School in Katowice. She received the scholarship of the Ministry of Culture in 1978 and has exhibited in Poland and internationally. Her work can be found in museums and private collections all over the world.

Source: www.lillakulka.art.pl/page/omnie/

Aleksandra Mańczak (1948-) was born in Bydgoszcz, Poland. She attended the Academy of Fine Art and Design in Lodz from 1969 to 1974, where she received her degree in textiles. From 1974 to 2011, she has worked at the Academy, first as a teacher, and then beginning in 1995 as a professor. In 1987, Mańczak was an advisor for *Leonardo* – the journal of the International Society for the Arts, Sciences and Technology. Her work has been featured in solo and group exhibitions around the world.

Source: www.manczak.com.pl/strona.php?t=notka_en

Born in Radom, Poland, **Jolanta Owidzka** (1927-) attended the Academy of Fine Arts, Krakow and the Academy of Fine Arts, Warsaw where she ultimately defended her studio fabrics thesis in 1952. Owidzka worked for several years at the Institute of Industrial Design, Warsaw. She has had more than 40 solo exhibitions in Poland and internationally. Her work can be found in galleries and museums around the world, and she regularly participates in international exhibitions like the Lausanne Biennial and the International Triennial of Tapestry in Lodz. Her daughter **Joanna Owidzka**, (1952-) is also a fiber artist.

Andrzej Rajch (1948-2009) was born in Lodz and attended the Academy of Fine Arts in Lodz (now the Academy of Fine Arts). He received his degree in fashion and textile design. After his graduation in 1973, he worked for the Academy of Fine Arts as the head of the Department of Textile Design.

Source: culture.pl/pl/wydarzenie/andrzej-rajch-gracje-tkanina-artystyczna

Jolanta Rudzka-Habisiak (1958-) received her degree in 1985 from the Academy of Fine Arts in textiles, and is currently a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts where she teaches a design studio in carpet and tapestry art. Rudzka-Habisiak is also the founder of the **Foundation Protexil**, a group which promotes Polish textiles in Poland and abroad.

Sources: www.muzeumwlokiennictwa.pl/do_pobrz/10.pdf and www.asp.lodz.pl/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=281:rudzka-jolanta&catid=127:r&Itemid=214&lang=pl

Antoni Starczewski (1924-2009) studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Lodz from 1946 to 1951. Working in both textiles and ceramics, Starczewski won a gold medal at the 26th International Competition of Ceramics in Faenza (1966).

Source: www.galeria-el.pl/formy-przestrzenne/antoni-starczewski.html

Professor Boleslaw Tomasziewicz (1930-) was born in Little Zabostowie near Lowicz. In 1955, he graduated from the State Higher School of Fine Arts in Lodz with a degree in textiles. Tomasziewicz worked with the Academy for over forty years, first as dean of textiles, then as head of the department of textiles, where he led the laboratory of apparel fabrics. In 2014, he was the subject of a major retrospective in his home country of Poland.

Source: www.muzeumlowicz.pl/aktualnosci/zobacz/279

About the Collectors

RAM Executive Director and Curator of Collections **Bruce W. Pepich** spoke with **Camille Cook** about the dynamics of building the collection of contemporary Polish fiber art that she gathered with her husband, **Alex**.

Bruce W. Pepich and Camille Cook, October 2015

Pepich: When did you start collecting contemporary Polish fiber art?

Cook: We started collecting on our first trip to Poland about twenty five years ago. We went there nine times, every three years.

Pepich: What drew you to the works of these Polish artists?

Cook: Their works were very exciting, and my husband and I wanted to be art collectors. We both came from households where rags were respected. Alex's mother was a quilter and my mother was a seamstress in Chicago who later had her own bridal shop. We were constantly surrounded by rags. We learned to respect the skill and artistry of construction in cloth.

Pepich: How did you make your purchases? Were they all made in Poland? Did you purchase works directly from the artists or did you purchase from art galleries and exhibitions?

Cook: Our trips to Poland immersed us in the best international textile work. We also went to the Lausanne International Tapestry Biennial. We commissioned some work, but it was more satisfying to find the work already executed. Then I became a member of the American Craft Museum's Collector's Circle, which I accidentally joined and inspired me to found Friends of Fiber Art in 1991. We purchased work directly from artists, and from galleries.

Pepich: Many of these works are small in scale. Was this a particular interest on your part when you started or did this evolve based on the work you saw?

Cook: Our house was packed solid so smaller scale work was a better fit. Thirty or so pieces were fitted into our entry hall, mostly black and white works, which went very well together. Artists making contemporary fiber art just didn't make things too large in scale. Some woven tapestries were about six by six feet, but it is impractical to hand weave a thirty-foot piece. Our largest pieces were commissions, like the ceiling canopy we commissioned for our home. Quilts are usually bigger but not meant for wall display like the smaller art works.

Pepich: You have multiple works by some of the artists. Do you like to collect in-depth throughout an artist's career?

Cook: For the most part, I thought they were skilled artists and if there was a creative variation in the style and subject of their subsequent work, we'd buy it. If the artists continued to produce good work we would continue to buy. Original one-of-a-kind, new fiber art was fortunately within our budget, and in our area of interest and appreciation.

Pepich: You have recently donated works from your fiber collection to a number of important museums across the country (including RAM). How do you see your gifts affecting these artists and the general public?

Cook: Large encyclopedic art museums don't have much storage and as a result are very picky about what they can acquire. Racine is an important center for art and craft materials, and an excellent place for this collection to end up. And the extensive Polish population in northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin make it a good location, too. We hadn't made a formal inventory so moving to a smaller home recently helped with that. Sadly, new creative movements such as textiles and other things enjoy intense popularity and then that attention fades; names that were not hot during their first recognition are sadly forgotten after a new material or idea appears in the market. In 1986, we went to University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee to see *Fiber R/Evolution* (with the Milwaukee Art Museum)—it was an intense time of discovering fiber art on the national scene—there was a great deal of creative energy.