

TAPESTRIES WEAVERS IN LATIN AMERICA

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ABSTRACT

To present three tapestry weavers of different countries and completely different life stories brings similarities, it means, their work, their technical process, the technique, the manual work, the card and as a result the tapestry. In observing the process of each one can be seen similar worries in relation to continuing the exercise of the activity where the apprentice is also the listener and the tapestry weaver the narrator, according to Walter Benjamin.

KEYWORDS: tapestry maker; technical process; apprentice; tapestry.

INTRODUCTION

*As more the listener forgets himself, more deeply is
engraved in him what is listened.
Walter Benjamin³*

Probably the life story of each tapestry weaver reflects in his Works, but a feeling is common to all and may be resumed in the words of Maximo Laura Taboada, where:

[...] the tapestry has an elaboration system with slow irreversible progression, situation that allows the meticulous, patient, and intimate meeting with technical and visual solutions, giving an

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³ BENJAMIN, Walter. *Obras Escolhidas – Magia e Técnica, Arte e Política*. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1996. P. 205.

opening to an infinite repertoire of possibilities submitted to the communicative intentionality of the work.

In which way will the tapestry weaver be able to captivate apprentices and this way eternize the process since the drawing's creation, the card's realization, the colors' selection, the long process of the most adequate technique selection, until its exhibition? The everyday at the tapestry studio nowadays suffered some changes, if we analyze how a studio in the Middle Ages worked, starting by the light of the room that for many centuries only worked in day light and sun light. Today we have many possibilities of artificial lighting that are very close to the natural day light, however it is perceptible that the lighting in some moments of the day, as well as in some periods of the year, favors a better visualization of the colors. *Even today many people, victims of the conventional image of the "dark ages", imagine the Middle Age as an "obscure" time, even from the colorist point of view* (ECO, 2007, p.99). They used red, blue, yellow, green, some earth nuances and the gold and silver string, and with this small option of colors obtained expressive results in his tapestries. According to David Batchelor, *the colors circle is analogical; the colors cartel is digital* (BATCHELOR, 2007, p. 127).

Another fact that changed in the centuries is the labor. The tapestry weaver job in the Middle Age and later on was a profession that the artisan learned in early teenage years. Many tapestry weavers learned in their own family, where the father and the grandfather were also tapestry weavers. Today many begin their activities at the university or as a curiosity. In many moments in history the image of the tapestry weaver was always linked to men, belonging to the women of the family the support in the warp, in the preparation of the strings of the web and in the finishing.

Today, in the many continents where tapestry happens, many women more than thirty years old do this activity. In the United States of America there is a preoccupation in bringing young apprentices to the studios to start enjoying the art of tapestry. The narrator figure, presented by Walter Benjamin, appears in this

moment, because the master tapestry weaver tells to the younger his experience and knowledge. In Europe, where tapestry exists there are many centuries in studios; the learning process was done from father to son and from the artisan to the apprentice who wanted to have a profession. The technique passed to the younger through manual work, where he started in the basic tasks, as separating the string of the web, making the warp and fulfilling the background of the tapestry. The *lissier*, responsible for the studio, assumed all important parts of the tapestry, as making the faces of the figures. Therefore, the apprentice learned through the *[...] experience that passes from person to person the source to which all narrators run for* (BENJAMIN, 1996, p. 198). The everyday life in the studio and the pursuit for an appropriate work by the responsible *lissier* forced the apprentice to produce as the demands and necessities of the card.

Today we may consider the presence of the apprentice at the studio something rare. Through the 20th century, new tapestry studios were created, but the figure of the apprentice who used to learn through the experience passed away as oral as in the manual making is getting lost. Would this be because of the lack of interest in the activity or the lack of economical opportunity?

The great narrator has always his roots in the people, mainly in the craft layers (BENJAMIN, 1996, p. 214). So is also the Peruvian tapestry weaver Maximo Laura Taboada (1959), son and grandson of tapestry weavers, when he was nine years old started his activities at the loom, in the city of Ayacucho in the Peruvian Andes. Parallely he always loved reading art books and the work of Picasso was a big influence in his childhood.

To Laura, before being a tapestry weaver it is necessary to be a painter, but he assumes since early age his activities at the loom, therefore would not be the communion of the activities? In the decade of the 80's he studied Hispanic literature at the University of São Marcos in Lima, he aimed to be a writer and a poet, but he got involved in student movements and did not follow this career. At

this same time he made contact with the Andean iconography and developed drawings to two very important phases of his work. One he nominated Ñaupayuyay (see figure 1) that he translates as the search for the Andean myths of the cosmic visions, of entities wrapped around a symbolic Andean universe. The other one, more contemporary, nominated Takionqoy (see figure 2), that he says it is a history of the messiah who promotes a religious and cultural resistance to the imposing of the Spanish conquerors of the 16th century. Laura used these historical references in his drawing and surrounds them in circles or spirals, symbolizing, as he says, the *renewal of energy*. In the loom he uses the traditional technique of the tapestry, besides *kilim* and *soumak*, and in many situations he reunites different colors in the same cable, creating the feeling of three dimensions. *To handle color is o handle limits of the language. It is trying to imagine, almost always through language, what the world would be without language* (BATCHELOR, 2007, p. 94). This technique provided him many international prizes, but one is very special to him, the “Grand Maestro de la Artesania Peruana” (2001). Laura keeps a studio with thirty to forty artisans weaving basically with wool of Alpaca and Llama, but also uses cotton, silk and synthetic strings. *As more as we treat color as independent, more we realize its dependency in materials and surfaces* (BATCHELOR, 2007, p. 115). It strengthens the fact that many colors used nowadays will only be possible if were obtained in synthetic materials dyeing. Laura weaves using a very large diversity of colors in each tapestry, and sometimes he is daring, but subtle, in his combinations. *The silence that color may provoke is a mark of its power and its autonomy. The silence is the way we have to give voice to the respect we have for everything that touches us to mute* (BATCHELOR, 2007, p. 100).

The water is a sacred element in the Peruvian iconography, the fishes and other living creatures that habit in it also compose some of his tapestries. Frequently he uses many forms in the first level that he abstracts from real and the background is composed by geometrical forms that involve figures of the first level. The light/dark also provokes the illusion of depth. *There is no substance underneath; there is no depth behind the appearance* (BATCHELOR, 2007, p. 74).

Figure 1



Máximo Laura
Party at the Andes II

Source of image: www.lavidaverde.com/tapestries/maximo.htm

Figure 2



Máximo Laura
Fish, 56" H X 46" W

Source of image: www.lavidaverde.com/tapestries/maximo.htm

According to Laura, the Peruvian Andean people keep many rituals inherited from their ancestors, and these historical references he uses in his drawings which become tapestries. There is a worry in searching and rescuing habits, rituals, elements of nature and local religion, and through tapestry to present to the world. In other work of this artist we see a floor carpet, useful, that represents one of the many Inca traditional drawings. These geometrical forms, so as the colors combinations, can be seen in many Laura's tapestries, composing in a subtle way their background (see figure 3).

Figure 3



Maximo Laura

Intimate dialogue with the mother, 1,30m X 1,24m

Source of image: www.maximolaura.com

Another Latin American tapestry weaver, Ernesto Aroztegui (1931 – 1994), born in Melo, Uruguay country city, did not have any contact from his family with tapestry. In the decade of the 50's, delighted by this technique, he searched in the Middle

East, in France and back in South America, with the Andean people, to learn a lot about the technique that each region used. *To learn is to go deep in the universal of the relations that constitute the Idea ad in the singularities that are corresponded* (DELEUZE, 2006, p. 237). Learning in each region the particularities of the tapestry technique used by them, he met the looms, which differ a little from a continent to another, the technique that each region develops, adapted to its product. The predominant raw material in the three regions is wool, but from distinct animals.

Aroztegui could be considered by Walter Benjamin the *merchant sailor*, the one that comes from far away and has always a lot to tell. And the 1400 and 1900 studio's *lissier* could be the artisan that lived, learned there and passed away his knowledge, his histories and traditions. *If the peasants and sailors were the first masters in the art of telling, the craftsmen were who perfected them* (BENJAMIN, 1996, p. 199).

Uruguay doe not have meaningful examples of the Pre-Colombian art and neither had expressive artistic movements until the decade of the 50's, only isolated artists appearing. Aroztegui appears then in the middle of the decade of the 60's in the artistic scenario of Montevideo, where he taught Art History at the Superior School of Art and participated of the theatrical scenes. In 1965 he created the Atelier of Montevideo, where he gave tapestries courses and along with his students created the Uruguay Tapestry Center (CETU). Jorge Abbondanza, art critic and particular friend with Aroztegui, wrote: *artists are rarely so interesting as their works* (ABBONDANZA, 1994, p. 3). Aroztegui involved even relatives in the art of tapestry, he created a reference in his country which gave fruits and even today new generations of tapestry weavers are formed.

His production as a tapestry weaver was always a search for the exercise of the technique, it means, creation and experimenting. According to Deleuze, *we may say that learning is an infinite task* (2006, p. 238). In his 25 years of profession he

was indefatigable in the search of new experiences, in the divulging of the tapestry in world events and involving new students, as such in Uruguay as in Brazil. The series of celebrities' portraits weaved by him shows the technical rigidity he always aimed, and the reality of the figures opposes the chromatic combinations used in the background. He even did experiences with optical deformations, where he enlarged or contracted the famous faces (see figures 4, 5 and 6). He used a technique at the loom where the warp becomes apparent, with the weave, make a kind of reticule.

Figure 4



Ernesto Aroztegui
Mahatma Ghandi

Source of image: ABBONDANZA, Jorge. Luiz Ernesto Aroztegui. *Têxtil&forum*, Hannover, n.2, p.44-45, 1995.

According to Rosalind Krauss, the reticule *reaffirms the modernity of modern art*, through two distinct ways, one spatial and other temporal. In the spatial sense it declares art autonomy and manifests in an *anti-natural and anti-real* way (KRAUSS, 2002, p. 23). In the temporal sense it may be analyzed as a characteristic that does not exist in the 19th century. Despite Aroztegui to

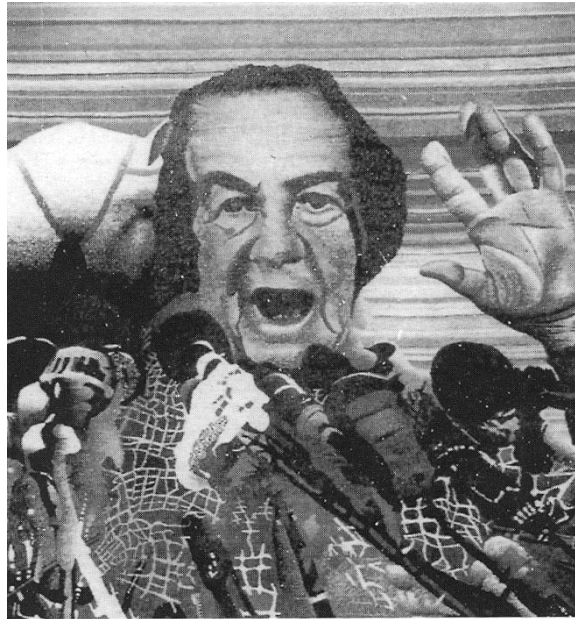
experiment this technique only around the 70's, the art critic Jorge Abbondanza classifies this series as been a search for new frontiers.

In his entire path, Aroztegui surpasses the limits of traditional textile language. In 1986 he participates of the Venice's Biennale and according to Gracilea Kartofel, art critic, the visitors [...] *entered, smiled indefectibly touched. The faces left transformed and expressions softened, the look nostalgic and alert* (1994, p. 7). All technical rigidity that Aroztegui used in his tapestries and the discipline he did his work could also be perceived in the contact he had with his students. *To learn is the name that suits the subjective acts operated in face of the objectivity of the problem (Idea), and knowing designates only the generality of the concept or the tranquil possession of a rule of the solutions* (DELEUZE, 2006, p. 236).

We relate again the making of the Uruguayan tapestry weaver to the experience of telling, where the best written narratives [...] *are the ones that least distinguish from oral histories told by a number of anonymous narrators* (BENJAMIN, 1996, p. 198). The nonexistence of studios in Uruguay and Brazil lead Aroztegui to reunite exercises propositions that include the used techniques in the many places where he has been learning, in three tapestries.

Specifically in the South-center of Brazil, the cities of São Paulo and Porto Alegre had the opportunity of living with the tapestry weaver for some years. He went to these cities where he taught tapestry courses. The "students' books", as Aroztegui denominated them, are three tapestries that reunite a series of exercises to the tapestry apprentices. In the first "student's book", also denominated "Textile Resources in the Plan", the apprentice initially learns how to warp his loom, using three strings by centimeter, of a very thin cotton. The warp follows a ritual with many stages that must be firm and even, because it is for sustaining the web.

Figures 5 e 6



Ernesto Aroztegui

Golda Meir and Jorge Luis Borges

Source of image: ABBONDANZA, Jorge. Luiz Ernesto Aroztegui. *Têxtil&forum*, Hannover, n.2, p.44-45, 1995.

Usually the apprentice still did not have contact with the proposed course, for this reason he looks at the “student’s book” as a whole. These are many exercises proposals that work as a structure to future tapestries. Among them we have the warp control, two to five colors shading, as such sensible as rational shadings, we still have mends between two weaved areas, such posterior as in the execution of the web. Minimal interpenetrations and hachure with two or more colors,

arabesques, curve forms, relief techniques, like the *Smyrna*, among others. To the good learning of the technique mentioned above, is primordial the presence of the tapestry master and his orientation. *The practical sense is one of the characteristics of many born narrators* (BENJAMIN, 1996, p. 200). In the end of this exercises' series, the apprentice develops a card with a drawing created by him. The main goal is that in this card there are the techniques proposed before, but how to proceed? The tapestry master will be able to suggest where the technical resources best adapt in that card. *The advice weaved in the living substance of existence has a name: wisdom* (BENJAMIN, 1996, p. 200). In this entire web, from the beginning to the end is proposed to the apprentice to use five colors of a same string, cotton, wool or acrylic, previously chosen.

To Aroztegui is more important the manual making in the loom told by the tapestry master, than any other kind of note. The apprentice [...] *is free to interpret the history as he wishes, and with that [...] reaches amplitude that does not exist in the information* (BENJAMIN, 1996, p. 203). In this second "student's book", Aroztegui proposes form domination exercises. The apprentice develops many cards to the orally proposed exercises, where the personal history of the apprentice makes a difference. *When the rhythm of the work seizes the listener, he listens to the histories in such a way he acquires spontaneously the narrative skill. This way is weaved the web in which is kept the narrative skill* (BENJAMIN, 1996, p. 205). In this second book, the apprentice chooses other five colors to weave his exercises. The final card of this book must not be fixed under the warp as in the first, the apprentice only uses it to do the marks in the warp and keeps it besides to observation and accompanying. Will these different experiences be able to help the apprentice in the choice of his preferences?

The idea of eternity always had in death its richer source (BENJAMIN, 1996, p. 207). This sentence finishes the feeling of all who had the opportunity to know and learn with Aroztegui, and by the other side, the commitment of passing away these teachings to new apprentices of tapestry. By the other side, the tapestries

developed by Aroztegui keep on been references to all those who appreciate this activity.

A third Latin American tapestry maker, more specifically Argentinean, born in Buenos Aires, is Jacques Larochette (1934 – 1998). Son and grandson of French tapestry weavers, soon made contact with the tapestry technique in his father's studio; in the decade of the 60's he receives an unusual indent to the reality of this country. Due a fire occurred in the prior decade in the Basilica of São Francisco, which compromised all main altar, it was chosen to execute a big dimension tapestry, it means, the biggest tapestry in America made in just one fabric. It has the dimensions of 12 meters high and 8 meters width, weighs around 300 kilos, was made in sheep and chiva's wool, and is composed of 14 colors. The author of the painting which originated the tapestry's card nominated "The Glorification of Saint Francis" (see figure 7) is the famous Argentinean contemporary painter, Horácio Butler, who put all his efforts to learn the tough exercise of drawing a card in such big dimensions to the tapestry.

The first challenge was the building of a loom with the necessary dimensions and which could support the tension of the warp strings, not forgetting the local limitations of the industry to this task. The second challenge was the execution itself, because there was not proper labor to work and it was needed to select workers from the community who had the profile to the learning of the technique and later on assumed this not conventional in their country task. According Larochette, this work demands patience, focus, manual skills and taste for the form. All these challenges suited the tapestry weaver Jacques Larochette, put all his efforts to teach his apprentices. There were four apprentices who assumed the tapestry making, from workers of public construction, used with the work of shovels and cement, to the handling of wool strings. The texture is directly related to the used materials and Deleuze considers the tissue as a striated space that may [...] *be infinite in length, but not in width, defined by the warp frame, the necessity of a comes and goes, implies a closed space* (2002, p. 181). They realized that [...] *one*

of the tougher problems they found in the learning is the lack of sensibility of the tact (LAROCHETTE, 2006, p. 57).

Figure 7



Jacques Larochette

The Glorification of Saint Francis, 8m X 12m

Source of image: LAROCHETTE, Jean Pierre. *Recordando a Jacques Larochette – El tapiz más grande de las Américas*. Berkeley: Gênesis Press, 2006.

Since the tapestry's creation up to the inauguration at the central nave of the Basilica, in October 4th 1972, four years passed. Time is an element very worrying among tapestry makers, not that weaving is slow, but life is in rush and while the card painter takes only seconds to create some kind of brush stroke, a tapestry

weaver weaves this same detail for hours or days. Larochette asks then: *is there any merit in rendering in tapestry the pictorial effect of a brush stroke?* (LAROCHETTE, 2006, p. 31). This question appears since the beginning of the 20th century and always returns, reflects exactly the dependence of the western tapestry towards painting, and very slowly some tapestry weavers start to question it. By the other side, the long time tapestry weavers coexist with the development of their tapestries creates complicity with the expressed content, through the right choice of the technique, colors and strings to be used. This process, that nowadays is little divulged, when comes to the lay public provokes curious and more critical looks, an admiring for the manual making and, to Larochette, [...] *a tapestry is a piece of life* (2006, p. 665).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In observing the three Latin American tapestry weavers' tapestries it is possible to perceive that, having or not lived with tapestry in family quarters, tapestry has a big power over these artists, each one in his own way. Laura, that by one side rescues the local history through his drawings, also absorbs the regional labor in the making of the tapestries. This is possible because these people, having a prior contact and domain on the technique, necessarily only need to adapt the resources that Laura's drawings demand.

Aroztegui, being an obstinate and insistent researcher in tapestry technique, also put all his efforts in divulging among his students all his knowledge. He used the technique to get the closest he could to the real and the making process was more important than the card creation. When the spectator is familiar with the image he sees, it means, the portrait of a celebrity, he becomes more susceptible in perceiving the used technical process, materials and colors. By the other side, in using the reticule's technique as a resource, associated to distortion of the

celebrities' faces, Aroztegui emphasizes the semblance. Did Aroztegui weave preferentially celebrities' portraits precisely to ennoble the technical exercise of tapestry?

Larochette, with a familiar history of many generations of French tapestry weavers, did not intimidate in front of a great challenge that was to make the biggest tapestry of America, winning bureaucratic, politic obstacles and specially summing up a such big dimensions work in such poor physical and human conditions, in a country where culturally there is not tapestry tradition.

Other names may be included in this tapestry weavers' relation, but there are a few of them who can work with tapestry and make a living out of that in Latin America countries. But what these tapestry weavers have in common, beyond a careful work, is the eternal worrying with the survival of this artistic manifestation.

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