Part 5 Textiles

Assignment 5

The Henry Moore Tapestries
A spiritual expression of a lifetime’s work

Between 1976 and Henry Moore’s death in 1986 a talented team at West Dean College collaborated with the artist to interpret and hand weave 23 large tapestries from his drawings. Moore kept 10 of these. In this essay I discuss the tapestries as works of art and the challenges the weavers faced in translating them. I also consider his choice of permanent location in which to hang those 10 tapestries and their impact within the space.

Henry Spencer Moore (1898 –1986) was best known as a sculptor for his monumental bronze figures. He also produced many drawings including The Shelter Drawings depicting Londoners taking refuge in underground stations during World War II.

West Dean College in East Sussex was set up to preserve and re-establish traditional crafts. The college’s now internationally renowned Tapestry Studio was established in 1976, coinciding with the Moore family’s early commissions.

Traditionally tapestries tell stories and provide decoration. They also serve practical purposes including insulating walls and absorbing sound. While Moore’s tapestries fulfil these functions they are primarily works of art.

Many great artists, including Matisse and Picasso, experimented with different media including ceramics and stained glass as well as textiles but tapestry stands apart because of its direct relationship with painting and drawing as it can reproduce these with a high degree of accuracy.

However tapestry weaving using traditional techniques is extremely time consuming and expensive and this may help to explain why as an art form it tends to be a
secondary practice. It may also have been a victim of ‘art hierarchy’ through its association with craft. These factors might account for why there is so little written about Moore’s tapestries.

Moore never made a drawing as a design for a tapestry but as a sculptor his keen eye could visualise how a tiny maquette would scale up and he applied this skill to deciding which of his drawings would work as large tapestries.

Eva-Louise Svensson, who led the Tapestry Studio in the 70s said: “He [Moore] was not interested in designing specifically for tapestry and was prepared to leave the interpretation to the weavers, provided this was faithful to the original.”

The tapestries were based on drawings made in the 40s, 70s and 80s (in the 60s Moore was fully focused on sculpture) scaled up as much as 12 times. The largest, *The Three Fates*, took 18 months for two people working together to weave and measures 240 cm x 330cm. It was particularly popular with the weavers as it depicts life from birth to death through spinning.

Woven from wool, cotton and silk, the tapestries represent Moore’s favourite themes (his obsessions as he described them) including the mother and child, woman in a landscape, and standing, seated and reclining figures.

By drawing vertically down the form and horizontally across, Moore was able to represent the curves and shapes of the body. He called this sectional drawing. He also used a subtle luminosity created with white wax crayon to dramatically enhance his forms.

Moore’s drawings were made using combinations of pencil, pen, charcoal, pastel, chalk, felt pen, wax crayon, chinagraph, gouache and watercolour wash. He would run his drawings under a tap to disperse charcoal dust and deliberately blot watercolour to create blurring.

Translating these effects was a formidable challenge for the 11 weavers. They took great care to authentically reproduce the quality of line and mark, as well as delicacy of colour; their dyeing skills helped greatly in colour matching. Eight of Moore’s 10
tapestries are almost monochrome using many different greys, alleviated with subtle blues and pinks.

Moore’s tapestries hang in the 16th Century Aisled Barn he had reconstructed for this purpose in 1981 in the grounds of his home of 40 years at Perry Green in Hertfordshire. They are the sole decoration and create an immersive experience. The artist’s skill in portraying sculptural form gives the tapestries a three dimensional quality and the luminosity and blurring of line a sense of the ethereal.

Moore told Eva-Louise Svensson that he felt the tapestries were taking on a life of their own, independent of the original drawings. I agree. As well as retaining the qualities of the drawings, they have revealed their essential beauty and sculptural form making them more readily accessible than the drawings, which were relatively small (more or less 30cm wide). The viewer is able to stand back and truly appreciate these larger scale works. Each tapestry is a unique artwork with textural qualities of its own, including the soft wispiness of the wool and the minor imperfections that differentiate the handcrafted from the industrial.

In 1982 Moore was approached about creating a tapestry with West Dean to hang in Canterbury Cathedral. He selected two drawings: *Mother and Child holding an Apple (1981)* and *Mother and Child (1980)*. The completed tapestries never made it to the cathedral as Moore decided to keep them for himself. Might this have been the prompt to make the Aisled Barn the setting for his growing collection?

Aisled barns are so called because their structure is similar to that of medieval churches. From Raphael’s Sistine Chapel tapestries (1515/16) to Graham Sutherland’s Christ in Glory for Coventry Cathedral (1962), many notable artists have designed tapestries for ecclesiastical settings.
Additionally, some prominent artists have dedicated themselves to the entire decoration of places of worship as an end of life expression of their art. Matisse’s interior for the Chapelle du Rosaire de Vence in the French Riviera between 1949-51 was one of his last achievements. Mark Rothko took his own life before the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas, a meditative space filled with his paintings, was completed. There are some parallels here with Moore’s Aisled Barn. It may not be coincidental that the barn is hired out from time to time by The Henry Moore Foundation for weddings.

Within these contexts I feel it is reasonable to conclude that the tapestries displayed in the Aisled Barn may be the artist’s final, personal and spiritual expression of a lifetime dedicated to his art. His relationship with the weavers was close and he supervised the hanging of eight of the tapestries. He died before the final two were completed.

[Word count excluding photo captions 1,042]

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References


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http://www.osbornesamuel.com/product/henry-moore-tapestries/  (accessed 29/03/17)


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500 word reflective commentary on completing Part 5

I may be guilty of having chosen the subject of the Henry Moore tapestries because I admire them rather than because they are a topic perfectly suited to the requirements of the assignment. I’ve some small experience in tapestry weaving having once done a four day course and this gave me appreciation of the patience, perseverance and skill that would have been invested in the project… and I have long been a fan of Moore’s drawings. Tapestry weaving was not for me but I became a fervent admirer of the art… and the craft.

I am grateful to my tutor for some helpful pointers which prompted me to think about tapestry in a historical and ecclesiastical context and enabled me to handle the topic in a way that responded appropriately, I hope, to the brief.

During my research I was astonished by how little written information is available on the tapestries as they are undoubtedly great works by a great artist and all the more poignant as they were produced so late in Moore’s life. Most of my information was gleaned from the one book written by the weavers and published by The Henry Moore Foundation. This focused on the process of creating the tapestries, so even this was of limited use as I was keen to restrict my writing to the essentials that described the nature of the tapestries and the challenge; the why and where being more relevant to the brief.

Part 5 overall was eye opening in terms of, for example, designing for sustainability and architectural uses of textiles but I found myself less absorbed in the fashion and textile design elements. I would have preferred a deeper focus on textiles in art but I kept telling myself to be open minded as inspiration comes from many quarters and all knowledge is a good thing.

The research point on Christian Boltanski’s 2010 installation Personnes was a highlight and I was glad to be introduced to such a profound work with so much meaning and relevance to our world today. This prompt, and my tutor’s, sent me off doing my own research into textile art installations and I perked up enormously as I discovered the work of Polish fibre artist Magdalena Abakanowicz. Also the textile work of Louise Bourgeois and Tracey Emin took on new dimensions for me. I’d seen some from both in the Tate in the past and been quite dismissive but found myself studying them in a much more appreciative light.

The major outcome for me having now completed Creative Arts Today is that I am better understanding what I am seeing and reading. My thinking has become more analytical and less dismissive and my ability to write about modern and contemporary art and my vocabulary have improved.

I’ve enjoyed the research and the writing and learnt a lot that will be of great practical benefit, as well as providing inspiration for my own practice, as I move on to Level 2. I’m very pleased I took this module.

[504 words]