Muñoz of Barcelona

by Electa Arenal

King Juan Carlos I and Queen Sofia were about to arrive. The new Spanish National Tourist Office in New York City was a beehive of secret-service activity. In the lower level Art Gallery, the works of seven Spanish sculptors and sculptor-painters (esculto-pintores) assembled for the opening bore witness to Spain’s antiseptic, hard-line, fascist legacy. A catalog prepared for the occasion did not mention the one piece that to me breathed with the vitality of genuine art: the long, rock-metal-earth-colored fiber hanging by Aurelia Muñoz, relegated to a main-floor wall where its monumental qualities could hardly be appreciated. Having escaped the fate of rigid encasement through classification as “strictly art,” her environmental tapestry is still there to be seen.

Art critic José María Ballester calls Muñoz a “pioneer of the new Spanish tapestry art.” In Spain, the influence of the popular craft tradition and of conceptual hierarchies (prejudices) has militated against the forging of new orientations and concepts of art in craft. But Muñoz is strong, witty, and wise. She is one of very few Spanish artists who have gone off the wall into the mainstream of “integrative art.” Her works are architectural, sculptural, environmental. One of the best-integrated of the Muñoz pieces is the focal point of the entry hall in a commercial building in Barcelona—a column of knotted cord and light that dips its stone-strung endings into a pool of water.

I met Muñoz on the third day of my first encounter with...
Barcelona in November 1974. At the time she was grappling with the problems of outdoor presentation of her work. I had already formed an aesthetic bond with the city, awed by the unity of its visual diversity and by the interrelationships of its art and architecture. My journal notes on the frescoes in the great museum of Romanesque art emphasize the pattern and placement of robes, bodies, and architecture, which run into and across each other, repeating the variety of abstract and natural themes and elements. Joy in line, design, motif: Miró, Picasso, Gaudí. And now I recognized Muñoz in it, too. Later, beside the stairs leading to the crypt of the Gothic cathedral, another recognition: the stones of rich brown brick color were undergoing the same subtle light changes I’d seen in the similarly toned hangings in Muñoz’s studio.

A Catalán, Muñoz is most closely related to the culture and history, the forms and sensibility, the land and landscapes of Barcelona, the Costa Brava, and Menorca. She traces her self-expression through handmade work back to childhood days in a Montessori school. Pottery was the first craft in which she exercised her hands as an adult. Soon she moved to textiles, experimenting with collages and embroidered tapestries. At the same time she indulged her bent for mind-work through research into the history and techniques of weaving, especially in the Iberian Peninsula, becoming an expert as well as a theoretician. Her apprenticeships led to the achievement of a high level of perfection in the crafts she studied. Two great Romanesque tapestries—one from the Cathedral of Gerona, another from Bayeux in France—were the immediate inspiration for the elaboration of her own fabric art. She had her first exhibition in 1962. In 1964, inspired by the work of Spanish Baroque embroiderers, she broke with her more conventional tapestry art based on geometric forms. From there it was a short leap into fully dimensional tapestry. Since 1969 Muñoz has participated in many shows each year, traveling around the world and at the same time keeping up a remarkable pace of creativity and production. Wherever she is, she finds material for her work: cashmere in Paris, pebbles and stones on Costa Brava beaches, mica, marine hardware. But she doesn’t insert, encrust, or apply these nonfabric materials; they are attached, keeping their own independent form.

In her studio on an upper floor of the building in which she lives, Muñoz does all the work from planning to finishing (including the dyeing) with the assistance of one full-time and an occasional part-time assistant. “First, my work consists of making a cardboard maquette. If the work is very complicated I then make a small model one-tenth in scale.” Of her materials she says, “I use natural fibers: wool, linen, velvet (chenniles), cotton, and so on. Recently I have been using sisal, linen, natural jute, or thick nylon cords to make open-structured macramé hangings. I like knotting techniques because...”

Capa Pluvial II (Rain Cape II), knotted sisal, 79” x 96½”, in red, brown, violet (1976).
Above: Mantell (Cloak), knotted sisal, 39" x 39", in maroon, rose (1977).
Left (above and below): Aurelia Muñoz in her Barcelona studio; Cascada Anillas (Waterfall), knotted sisal, 105" x 59", in rust, oxblood, gray (1974).
Opposite page: Ente Communitario (Communal Spirit), knotted jute, 39" x 98", in pink, rust, lilac, maroon (1977).
by not using the loom I can be freer in the development of sculptural forms and open areas." The simplicity of her statement belies her role as a leader of the Spanish fiber art renaissance and her devotion to rethinking, researching, and transforming techniques and possibilities.

Her relation to art, design, costume, and craft is complex. A case in point is the inspiration she drew from Velázquez's portraits of the Infantas and women of the court, with their ribbed and armored clothing. Fascinated by the oblong, structured skirts of the royal subjects and the sense of volume captured by Velázquez, Muñoz made her own abstracted interpretations. Thus finding craft portrayed in art, she extracted and brought it up to date in her own craft technique experiments. A more direct and ancient clothing inspiration has been the straw peasant rain capes of the Orient and Mexico. Spain, like Mexico (which Muñoz visited for the first time last year, taking time out from a symposium to learn the weaving techniques of the Huichol Indians), is a country where "popular" and "cultured" art—both literary and plastic—have characteristically nurtured each other. Muñoz's work bears its own combination of these elements: primeval, rustic substance and shadow, interwoven with refinement and elegance.

The installation of an exhibition of her work takes days and is of key importance to Muñoz, for it entails the creation of an environment. Most recently she created just such an environment for her exhibition at The Hadler Galleries in New York (September 22—October 29). Several posters were mounted as if they were the cardboard maquettes of the works to be seen. Sixteen (continued on page 80)


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**Muñoz**
continued from page 61

industrial work (seven large and nine small) comprised this show—wall hangings, curtains, sculptural "entities" (Ente Social, Ente Místico), environmental/dramatic pieces, and miniatures. Power of form and fold and cord, imaginative play of curve and space, and the subtlety of textural and color changes characterize these pieces. They cast shadows, enclose and play with space. Stones and slivers of mica add reflection, potential sound, and weight, and strengthen the connections to the natural. Some of her pieces are evocative—of cultures remote in time and place. Some seem to relate to the shelter and clothing of those living close to the earth.

Seizing upon traditional "women's work," allowing a plurality of reminiscences to participate in its richness, Muñoz has unabashedly stalked into man's sculptural and architectural world and laid claim with it, to a significant place.

**Workshops**

**California**

ASLOMAR. Glass Art Society annual meeting (April 23–26). For details and registration, write: Sylvia Vigenti, 20000 North Greenway, Southfield, MI 80206.

BERKELEY. At Fibervorks, 1940 Bonita Ave, 94704: Bookkeeping for artists (Dec. 20) with Ted Mitchell, C.P.A. and stained-glass artist. At Some Place, 2990 Adeline St., 94703: Tapestry and kumi himo (Japanese plaiting) with Kaethe Kliot, bobbin lace and spring with Jules and Kaethe Kliot (continuous 4-week sessions).

**Connecticut**

NEW HAVEN. At The Creative Arts Workshop, 80 Audubon St., 06511: Metalsmithing with Gene and Hiroko Pilajanski (March 11–19), in conjunction with "National Metalsmiths Invitationiial" exhibition (March 5–April 15).

NEW MILFORD. At The Silo, Upland Rd., RFD 3, 06776: Basketry with Karl Grell Lennings (Dec. 14).

**Delaware**

WILMINGTON. At Delaware Art Museum, 2391 Kentmere Parkway, 19806: Weaving and tapestry with Sigrid Meier (Jan.–May); introduction to sculptural and metal sculpture with Matthew Celler, pottery with Virginia Walters, silversmithing with Eleaner Nichols (Feb.–May); needle art with Shella Ashby (Feb.–May); jewelry casting with Donald Flook (Feb.–March 18); leaded glass with John Matthews (March, dates to be announced); pottery with Cynthia Bringle (March–April, dates to be announced).

**Idaho**

SUN VALLEY. At Sun Valley Center for the Arts, 327 4th N.W., Albuquerque, New Mexico 87107

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**KENTUCKY**

LOUISVILLE. At Center for Continuing Education, University College, University of Louisville, 40208: Basketry with Jon Rios (Jan. 27–29) and textiles with Joan Michaels-Paque (Feb. 24–26). Write: Clarita Whitney, Massachusetts

BOSTON. At The Harcourt School of Bookbinding, 9–11 Harcourt St., 02116: A 12-week course in the fundamentals of bookbinding is offered every fall and spring; advanced classes include leather binding, gilding, and repair; weekend workshops deal with specific processes and problems. For details and dates, write: Emily and Sam Ellenport, directors.

WORCESTER. At Craft Center, 25 Sagamore Rd., 01605: 10-week courses (Jan. 30–April 7): silkscreen fabric printing with Virginia Hench, enameling with Judith Daner, stained glass with Ronnie West, weaving with Anne Forbes, furnishing refinishing with Donald Steinmetz, photography with Ron Rosencost.

MINNESOTA

DULUTH. At University of Minnesota, Ceramics Studio, 55812: Ceramics with Jack Earl (Feb., dates to be announced). Write: Thomas Kerrigan, associate professor.

**New Hampshire**

ENFIELD. At LaSalette Seminary: "Seminar '76" (Jan. 15–21): Ceramics with Jerry Champagne, leather with Paul Williams, metalsmithing with Heiki Seppa, silkscreen/setigraphy with Lois Johnson, stained glass with Paul DuFicour and Charles Desliller, weaving with Barbara Wallace. Write: League of New Hampshire Craftsmen, 205 North Main St., Concord, NH 03301.

**New York**


**Texas**

HOUSTON. At Hyatt Regency Hotel: "Art as Catalyst," 8th annual convention of the National Art Education Association (March 17–22). For details, write: Laurie Hamilton, NAEA, 1916 Association Dr., Reston, VA 22091.

**Virginia**

RICHMOND. "Arts and Governments, The Cultural Policy" (Jan. 25–29) will explore the government's role in supporting the arts at the federal, state, and local levels. Co-sponsored by the American Council for the Arts, BRAVO, U.S. Dept. of Education, and the State Arts Councils of Virginia. For details, write: Clarita Whitney.

At Valentine Museum, 1015 East Clay St., 23219. Workshops: February Assembly (April, dates to be announced); workshops on textile techniques.