



**EXPRESSION IN FIBER:
THE ART OF ELEANOR MERRILL**

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ORGANIZED BY ELLEN H. JOHNSON



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COVER: *That the Wind Should Not Blow on the Earth*, detail, 1974

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FOREWORD

Few aesthetic problems are as perplexing as those involved in defining just what makes up the "minor" arts, or what really differentiates the "high" arts from crafts. Clearly, size alone cannot relegate something to the minor arts, nor can medium, nor function. Were this so, many of Jan van Eyck's paintings, the plaques of Nicholas of Verdun, and all manuscript illuminators (not to mention all architects) would take their respective places in a History of the Minor Arts. We might agree that small scale, precious materials, and utilitarian function *generally* are aspects of the minor arts; but the category "crafts" is still more elusive. Can we discriminate between ancient vases and modern pottery, between a Cellini saltcellar and fine silver cufflinks, between medieval tapestries and good contemporary weaving, and consider one group "high" art but the other crafts? Let us agree to make comparisons of equals in quality; must we not then either accept the Euphronius crater and Bayeux tapestries as "crafts," or good metalwork, macramé, and pottery as "serious" art?

I intentionally use the word "serious" because the term cuts to the quick of the semantic issue. Like "minor," it is dissonant to me because of the implicit overtones of quality and importance. Eleanor Merrill's fiber art looks like crafts. That she and it are "serious," however, is indisputable. The mastery of her methods and her purist attitude toward wools and sheep could not be more in tune with our notion of crafts.

Yet, there is nothing the least bit functional about *In the Shadow of Peter* or *Before the Dawn Wind Rises*. Must we conclude, therefore, that only the materials and methods matter?

These questions and many others come to mind as we mount this exhibition. We admit that we have no easy solution to defining crafts. We will find satisfaction, however, if others are prompted to question the facile labels we often attach, so arbitrarily, to art, and the assumption that painting is inherently better than weaving, sculpture than pottery. Categories get in the way of seeing straight (one remembers that Chardin was put down for being “only” a still life painter). Asking *how* something is expressed is relatively easy; asking *what* is expressed is a deeper question.

The Allen Memorial Art Museum is very grateful to the Ohio Arts Council, whose program to support living Ohio artists prompted and indeed made possible this exhibition and catalogue. Professor Ellen H. Johnson generously consented to serve as guest curator of the exhibition, the character of which is entirely hers. The lively, provocative interview published here is witness to her creative, probing talents. And the professional, yet touchingly human attitudes of Eleanor Merrill are stimulating evidence of a whole person immersed in art.

Richard E. Spear
Director



Eleanor Merrill — finishing *Malachi*, February, 1975

CONVERSATION WITH ELEANOR MERRILL

EJ: Standing here in your garage, surrounded by looms with three large works in process, piles of rope, sisal, wool, and such, and having seen a spinning wheel beside the loom in the living room (and another loom near the piano in the kitchen), and having been told by your daughter, Rebecca, that she helps you to card wool, I gather that you like to be involved with the whole process of weaving, and to know and prepare your materials so that you can select and control things from the beginning.

EM: That's very true. I do like to choose things so that I can arrange everything from the beginning. And there are very few things in life that you can control. It's nice when you get a sheep. It's like algebra. I came home the other day and said the nice thing about algebra is that it has an answer; unlike all these things I've been doing for so many years that have no answer—you keep on going and going and there's always another project in your head, there's always another problem, but algebra has an answer. Once you've got it down to its simplest form, there it is.

EJ: How can you be so sure about sheep—how do you know what kind of an animal you want the fleece to come from for a particular work?

EM: I took courses in sheep raising at the California State Polytechnical University at Pomona because I had done some work with wool, and it was very clear to me that I just didn't know enough about it.

EJ: What did you learn in sheep raising?

EM: Well, we learned all about the different kinds of sheep and what you raise when you live in Climate A or Climate B, or if you're a 4-H'er, or if you want wool only, or if you want wool plus mutton, or if you live in very high mountains. And we walked around in the slog and we cut off tails and we trimmed hooves and we gave them shots.

EJ: How does that help you as a weaver?

EM: Because I really know from the beginning. Now I could look at the fleece and tell whether it was good wool; or I could say "Not enough vitamin B" or something like that. I could tell what kind in the sense of was this a Lincoln, or was this a grade sheep? Some fleeces are very high quality; some are very fluffy, like knitting wool; some have no loft at all, closer to string ("lofty" wool is springy or bulky in comparison to its weight). The Lincoln, which is long, has no loft at all, and is quite a bit like string; but it has a lovely shine,

like human hair. Then there's the Scottish Blackface. It's rough like carpet wool and has small white ends that are called kemp. If you dye this, the ends will never dye. This is what Harris Tweeds have. There are several other English breeds that I've picked up. I've been lucky to go places where I can find pure Leicester, pure Scottish Blackface, pure Lincoln, just by happenstance.

EJ: Where do you find your fleeces?

EM: In Washington, I just went to people who had sheep. In Ohio, I went to the Ohio Wool Pool; that's where I found the Lincoln fleece. Lincoln are the largest sheep extant. They get to be small pony-size, and their fleeces grow very long—12-13 inches. It's graded as what is called "braid." If you've had your hair braided for a long time and you undo it, it has this sort of curl. This is what sheep in general used to be like, with this nice braid-curl as opposed to short crimp. Merino has quite a short staple, it's crimped, in zig-zags like the edge of an old potato cutter. It's very soft, so that if you want something sturdy and sterling, you don't choose something that's very soft and malleable, you choose something that's out there with all its elbows. Within a limited range, you have a good size of variables in wool.

EJ: Are any of these things lying around here actual fleeces?

EM: Oh, yes, they certainly are. I have a lot of fleeces that if you open them up, you see the whole shape of the sheep. Most of these are just as the fleece came. Unfortunately, some of the ones that I got in Ohio came with moths, so I had to wash them. I'd much prefer to spin them first and wash them afterwards. It works better.

EJ: Why?

EM: Because it's easier to spin. It's easy to handle, easy to pull apart and you only have to pick it once; it's easier to wash skeins of wool than it is to wash large fleeces.

EJ: When you want to use some of this rather dirty-looking rope, how do you wash that?

EM: This is how it comes. It's just solid grease, really. We take the ones I've been using recently, which are cargo nets, and spread them out on the concrete apron and get all four children and we untie all the knots, which takes a long time to do. Then we divide them. Some of them come apart as sections of rope and some have to be cut into lengths; it depends on how the net was put together. There usually are three sections; but this has one section, these have thirteen, and this seventeen. Then we put them into one of these galvanized washtubs with soap, washing soda and cold water from the hose and the children jump up and down and sing songs.

EJ: What sort of songs?

EM: They sing sort of washing songs—usually folk songs. Then the children in the neighborhood come and jump, too, because after all, if our children are jumping why shouldn't they? Then we spread the rope out on the fence outside to dry. I usually leave it out for a while so it gets wind and rain and if it hasn't been rinsed enough, it gets rinsed more.

EJ: Do you rinse them with the hose?

EM: We put them back in the tub and just jump up and down. Sometimes the children are more efficient, sometimes less.

EJ: Is that rope in the *Lachrymae* or what kind of material is it; where did you get it?

EM: It comes from jute mats which I got in California, where the highways are often depressed or on

the sides of hills, and they have prewoven mats which they put down on the cut so the land won't all fall into the highway, and the grass grows and the mat just stays there. But for some reason a lot of these were taken up and we bought them at a second-hand rope place.

EJ: What kind of rope is it in the piece you're working on here (*Malachi*)?

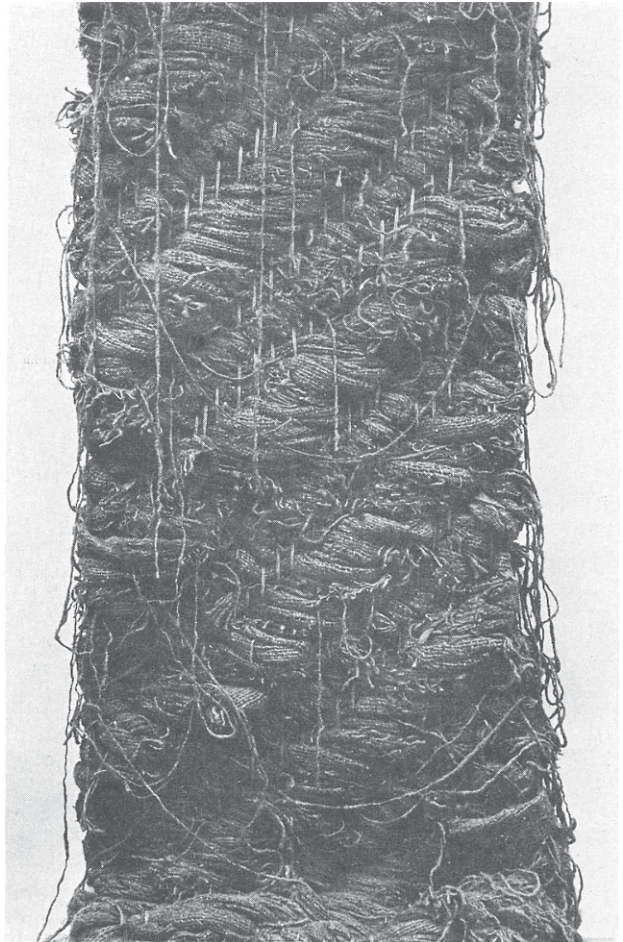
EM: That's manila, which you just can't buy anymore; but for this particular piece I went to Houston to the turning basin where the ships come in, up the river. You can't get into this dock area; there are huge cyclone fences. So we had to find a friendly stevedore who was willing to smuggle us in on his truck and help us find the old ropes that aren't strong enough for them to use anymore. They won't sell them second-hand; they just throw them away and burn them. To me, they're exactly what I was looking for. If you buy new material, you buy it at a rope maker's (the nearest I know is in Los Angeles). Xenia, Ohio, is a good source of material. You have to go scrounging around.

EJ: Do you like the human contact with this old material?

EM: I like that very much. I like the feeling that the material has had a life of its own, that it's been in use, that it has had a job to do that has had something to do with people.

EJ: That it's taken part in someone else's life?

EM: Has taken part in its own life really; one of the important things about doing all these things from the beginning is that you discover these materials have very much their own life. One rope from one net is not like another rope from another net. One kind of sheep is not like another kind of sheep. So you choose carefully



Lachrymae, detail, 1973

which one you want to use. This is a smooth, rather linen-like rope and it makes a very different piece than that browner, rougher fiber that's in the *West of Roswell*. So that when I wanted a prophetic figure in a kind of embracing gesture (*Malachi*), I didn't choose a rope which has rough edges that would prickle you—in actuality, not only visually. If I wanted to hug that rope, all those little tentacles would be out sticking into me, so I chose this smooth kind. If I'm weaving with wool, I choose wool which in its inherent nature—whether it's long and shiny, or short and fluffy, or light or dark, of one color or another—has to do with what it is that I'm really weaving about. This is why I like to be surrounded with materials.

EJ: Do you choose the color carefully as you are working, or is this just the way the natural fibers come in the *Malachi*?

EM: I choose it fairly carefully. I take one of these ropes and take half of it for this side and half of it for that side so that they match and to a point I look at it to see if I need more dark or more light. The colored piece which is called *That the Wind Should Not Blow* took me a great deal of time because I would have to look and adjust the colors to go with what I had done before. The color work in this piece is easier because there is a much smaller range of variables. I do look at it carefully and I do match the sides.

EJ: How do you get the variation in color that you do have here? Where does it come from?

EM: Each rope is different. No two pieces are exactly alike because of the way they've been used and the things that have happened to them. I don't like buying things where the diameter is always exactly the same.

EJ: When you use dyed fiber, I suppose you dye it yourself?

EM: Yes. All the ones I've ever used, I've dyed myself. It's very smelly. Some friends of mine have said, "Don't invite me to dinner again if you are going to be dyeing."

EJ: It's certainly clear that you like to control the whole process! And you apparently feel that you can trust your hands and your body more than some mechanical force.

EM: I know I consciously feel when I'm weaving that I choose to weave with my hands—I use a simple loom which I work with my hands as opposed to one where I could throw a shuttle through. I like the feel, the tactile qualities of weaving. And I like weaving that's large enough to surround you.

EJ: You mean while you're in the process of making it as well as after it's finished?

EM: Yes. I like an environmental sense. I like the contact. Weaving is not something that you look at from a distance, but it's something that you're in immediate, close, body contact with. I'm sure this goes down to a heritage—thousands of years of being surrounded by baby blankets, long hair, clothing, tents, shelters, things like that.

EJ: You mean a protective kind of surrounding then?

EM: I suspect that there's built into us after "X" number of years the feeling that fibers are a sort of natural protection. They keep the cold, hard world out. I suspect that there is something to that. I could make some sort of uneducated guess that this may be one of the reasons that weaving is coming in right now; it's perhaps a silly guess—I hadn't thought of it before—that in times of such uncertainty, it's not a bad idea to be able to build your own shelter. You can carry it with you, you



Up from Owens Valley I, 1974

can take it places, you know that you're making it yourself and you can make it again if you have to. It conforms itself to you, which is nice.

EJ: I think that's a most interesting idea. I was also wondering if, when you mentioned liking to have the weaving surround you, did you mean visually, as well as emotively and protectively?

EM: Yes, visually. I like wide landscapes for instance,

I like the West, where it just goes on and on—it's open. I like that very much.

EJ: It seems to me that your work is very much affected by your response to nature.

EM: Yes, I think that the sense of place, the landscape, influences me very much, as in the piece called *Up from Owens Valley*. The weekend I got my M.F.A., instead of going to graduation,