



# Textile narratives

**A**NNIKA EKDAHL'S, tapestries, in rich palettes of colour, swarm with people, symbols and patterns. Monumental pictorial narratives woven in the time-consuming tapestry technique, they are related to and linked with their precursors: The Lady and the Unicorn in Paris, The Hunt of the Unicorn at The Cloisters (a branch of The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York), the tapestries in Wawel Royal Castle in Krakow, The Devonshire Hunting Tapestries at the Victoria & Albert Museum. She has seen them all and more besides. Studied them, been awe-inspired and intrigued by them. Two of her tapestries we saw on a visit to her Kyrkhult studio in Blekinge have traces of these powerful wellsprings woven into them. And that became our starting-point.

Several mediaeval tapestries are in many ways shrouded in mystery as to what the different symbols meant and which stories they want to tell. In some cases it is not known for certain where they were woven, nor by whom. Now, though, was our opportunity to find out more about contemporary tapestry narrative.

Sat before me was Annika Ekdahl, artist and weaver of *Follow Me (interior): Shine & Follow Me (exterior): Grow*, her two latest works commissioned by KORO/Public Art Norway for Oslo University College.

Our conversation began with the first of these, which deals with light.

The motif is seen from above. Strings of light hang around the room and a girl in a reflective vest, that says "Follow me", is turning on the lights. The project description states that this has to do with learning, insight, understanding. Comprehending and experiencing. There is so much to explore at college, so many risks to be taken for LIGHT to turn on.

Somebody who saw the project proposal commented that reflective vests could often be seen at airports. Was there perhaps something to do with daring to rise, learning to fly?

– It is all open to interpretation, said Annika. I liked that association, the person had understood what I wanted to say and that felt good.

The motif is also about models, having good models and not so good, seeing what others have done and drawing your own conclusions.

Annika's near and dear figure in the composition: her husband Peter reads in one pose, while in another he sits and thinks. Her friend Silvio in a striped sweater is in the middle, playing the piano. Lying on a cushion, reading, is her friend and colleague, Birgitta Nordström. She often appears in Annika's tapestries,

and not by accident, Annika pointed out. Theirs is a long and significant friendship. The girl turning on the lights is a daughter in law. Various animals are guest characters in the picture, from mediaeval prototypes.

– I saw the swan in *Swan and Otter Hunt*, in the Devonshire Hunting Tapestries at the V&A, featuring several swans. It needs to be saved, I thought, and why not perched on a velvet armchair.

The ape holding an apple is a symbol for *Memento mori* – remember that you will die. It comes from a border on one of the Wawel Royal Castle tapestries, in Krakow. There, the apple is being given to a tied ape. Here, the viewer is given eye contact and offered the apple.

Then there is a unicorn. The whole thing is played out on a red floral patterned rug, with several oriental rugs tucked into the corner as well as a rölakan, very true to life, with its characteristic ridges.

## ANNIKA EKDAHL

Lives in Kyrkhult, Blekinge

Education: 1989-94, Master of Fine Arts, HDK School of Design and Crafts.

Professorships: associate professor at HDK 2008-11.

Guest professor at Linköping University.

Currently guest professor at Gothenburg University.

Annika is a self-taught tapestry weaver, who has worked up her own technique and, several years after starting to weave, studied gobelin tapestry technique, which in her view was of great benefit.

Represented (selection) from 2000 on:

Röhsska Museum, *The Baroque Party* (2000).

Falkenberg Commune, retirement home, *Darlings* (2003).

Värmland Museum, *The Theatre in the Park* (2005).

Västra Götaland Region, *Definitely Gold* (2008).

Nationalmuseum, *Road Movie: Visiting Mom* (2010).

[ANNIKAEKDAHL.SE](http://ANNIKAEKDAHL.SE)

[ABECITAKONST.SE/GOBELANGER-AV-ANNIKA-EKDAHL](http://ABECITAKONST.SE/GOBELANGER-AV-ANNIKA-EKDAHL)

VM articles on Annika Ekdahl appeared in: 1/05, 4/11.

Tapestries will be shown at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York autumn/winter 2014/2015.

[METMUSEUM.ORG](http://METMUSEUM.ORG)



The working method for mediaeval tapestries was usually to have an artist responsible for a cartoon and others painting in the cartoon, providing the basis for the weaver to work from. In addition, spinners and dyers were involved in the process. Annika Ekdahl does all the work herself. Apart from spinning. That is done in Norway at Hoelfeldt Lund. A lustrous art weave Spelsau wool yarn, one she would never like to be without. Dyeing she does herself, as she works. That is significant. She likes the added unpredictability, the element of risk. That is an important part of the way the work grows.

– There is nothing more dull than a heavy woven surface with no surprises. That can actually make me angry. Tapestry weaving is a highly demanding art form, I work on a big scale, it takes a long time, a lot of material has to undergo transformation, it is costly, you have to give it time and it takes time to look at it. It would be disloyal to those looking at the work not to push it as far as I can, adding:

– Every technique has its own set of conditions. In tapestry, it is easy to link fields along a diagonal. That needs to be resisted, resisting the temptation to make it too easy for oneself.

**WEAVING WITH SLITS.** Some of her colleagues sew up the slits while weaving is in progress. Annika chooses to weave without slits, as that suits her art form.

The motif is created as a collage of her own photographs, edited on the computer. The sketch work in this case takes around three months. To get the character, correct proportions and poses of the animals, she made use of toy animals, which she photographed at different angles. It would be inconceivable for anyone else to weave her pictures, everything is inexorably interconnected.

On the other hand, she is not averse to designing rugs for someone else to weave, that does appeal.

**DYEING IN THE STUDIO.** Experience is the foundation for the way she dyes nowadays, more intuitively. Red is a favourite. Green is harder. Getting the tone right, when it so often tends towards the yellow or the blue, the constituent colours. Dyeing a grey yarn yellow, on the other hand, produces some fascinating shades. For a muddier colour, a little brown is added by mixing blue/yellow/red. One colour she does not use is pure black. There is no pure white in a weave to strike up a contrast. Even using the whitest of white yarns, there would still be some colour from shadows and texture. Thinking that a weaving is two-dimensional is incorrect. A yarn has body, she emphasizes, and that gives a weave character.

The dyed yarn is suspended in one metre lengths above the weaving. She would not dream of making small butterfly skeins, that takes time, makes for tangles and interferes with a sense of connection and immediacy.

Three plied yarns are twisted and turned. Her only tool when weaving is provided by her fingers. As work progress, more and more yarn ends lie on top of the weaving. She works close up, blending, sensing. And mistakes do happen. She undoes it then.

The warp is horizontal. Always linen for the warp. With the face up. At its widest, the weaving width is 3 metres. She always weaves with the motif up so the tapestry hangs warppways, contrary to tradition.

– The reason for that is because I weave in the “reading” direction, she explained, the warp is a constant throughout the weave, while the weft is not. I would not be sure about hanging the work weftways. My earliest work, from 1994, does not seem to have been affected. Which to me is a sign that it works warppways. She always works in artificial light.

– The problem with daylight is that it keeps changing. When to come to public art, tapestries are generally not hung in daylight, and as they are going to live in artificial light, so why not make them under those conditions?

Since the tapestry is rolled up bit by bit on the cloth beam, the motif slowly disappears. This is an added, significant risk factor. She has a pair of binoculars lying on the warp, to look through back to front for getting the overall feel of the composition.

After cutting off, tapestries are tacked down to the wooden floor in their house. Damp cloths are laid on top. A light press with the iron provides a finishing touch, setting the fibre a little.

She began on *Follow Me (interior): Shine* first. Why was that?

– It’s a simple answer. I had just done a verdure (flourishing landscape motif with flora and fauna, from the French for green, editor’s note), *Road Movie (verdure): Visiting Mom*. That tapestry, which has more red in, gave me a new colour spectrum to work with.

The second tapestry, with mainly green tones, *Follow Me (exterior): Grow* is on the loom. People and animals have moved out into the garden with all its growth. The same people, new roles and other animals from mediaeval models. *The twins share out loot*, in Vienna, has a tortoise that got in. A rabbit from *The Lady and the Unicorn* in Paris also popped in. The lion (which she met on a visit to the Vatican) and the lamb drink from the same spring, symbolizing peace. Birgitta Nordström turns to look at them in the tapestry. Not at random, there is something intentional.

**above** / *Follow Me (interior): Shine*, 3 x 2 m.

**below** / Sketch for *Follow Me (exterior): Grow*, 3 x 2 m.



– Birgitta, if anyone, has an eye for that kind of cultural historical reference, explained Annika.

Green certainly predominates, but there are also streaks of red and vice versa in the first tapestry. Which links them up with each other.

Taking up the thread of the creative process itself, how do things happen?

When ideas are conceived and the work comes into being.

– For me, it's about the process of creating and forming. The best explanation I can give is that it has three phases: investigation, understanding and doing. In the first period, it's about investigating both within and without. What sets the conditions? A commission, a show or just me wanting it.

The conditions for these tapestries for KORO/Public Art Norway were drawn up in a closed competition. It gave her, she says, enormous freedom and the chance to go way beyond herself. What guided her were the place, the dimensions and that the two weaves were to be seen together.

– The viewers include students, people working there and visitors. It helped that I have been in all those different roles.

It was her proposal sketch that won against four other artists working in diverse materials.

Parallel to completing this commission, estimated some time in 2015, she is involved in another narrative. This is an artistic project on tapestry technique. She is careful to point out that it is not scientific scholarship. Shelves are lined with tomes written on the technique, so what purpose would there be in her taking up the question from that perspective. Instead, it is more about her personal journey, quite concretely and in the material world, both in the doing and the writing.

**top left** / Annika Ekdahl is now engaged in an artistic project on tapestry technique: A hunt for the deer, in woven and written form.

**below left** / from *The Stag Hunt* (1660), Wawel Royal Castle in Krakow.

– When I discovered that the word *texere* means to join together (both text and textile), the penny dropped. The meaning is strengthened in that the textile, especially tapestry, is narrative, storytelling. And I have always written. It demands complete focus, like weaving.

THE INVESTIGATION PHASE for her latest project involves drawing a boundary. The boundary in this case is the deer:

– There are winged deer, deer that pull age along, I have seen a heraldic tapestry with a deer wearing a crown. And then the deer I saw on a tapestry in Wawel Royal Castle – it popped up all of a sudden on a staircase tapestry and I thought, what is it with that deer? This creature, hunted so often, shy, impossible to tame... appearing so frequently in historic tapestries. Questions arose and the process started. Her guest professorship at the University of Gothenburg, Department for Culture, lasting five years, facilitated this project. The funding came from the craft patron Barbro Wingstrand. The remit also includes tutoring on craftsmanship at the University of Gothenburg – the programme on craftsmanship and cultural heritage craft skills.

YET ANOTHER MAJOR EVENT with a financial bearing, aside from the definitive acknowledgement of Annika Ekdahl's artistic achievements, was winning the 2013 Nordic Award in Textiles of 250,000 SEK.

Plain sailing for her, it could be said. The truth of the matter is rather that if you take up one of the hardest things around, in this case the Gobelins tapestry tradition with its technique, format and narrative tradition as in the Middle Ages, when it was at its height and took precedence over painted works of art, then make it your own, we are looking at right and fair recompense.

It should be noted that everything she has created over the last 15 years has been sold. ▲