

## Tapestries From the '60s, Woven Anew

Sheila Hicks's Tapestries to Again Hang at Ford Foundation



Sheila Hicks's restored tapestries at the Ford Foundation building.  
ELIZABETH LIPPMAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

By **ROBIN POGREBIN**  
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Though her celebrated tapestries now hang in museums across the world, those she designed in 1967 for the [Ford Foundation](#) building in Manhattan have always been special to the textile artist [Sheila Hicks](#).

A balance of detailed intricacy and monumental scale, they were made with an understated, honey-colored thread that warmed, but did not overwhelm, the rooms in which they hung and were important early works in what has stretched into a long career.

“In the ’60s, there were alternatives,” Ms. Hicks said in a recent interview at the foundation building. “Rothko was alive. You could have brought color in here.” Instead, she opted for a subdued tone, so people “could spend hours in the room in meetings” without feeling an assault on the senses.

But while being fireproofed sometime in the 1980s, the tapestries were saturated with a caustic chemical. Threads rotted, crisped and popped, and the work also suffered the wear and tear of time as people leaned or brushed their bags against them. “There was no reversal,” Ms. Hicks said of the damage.



Sheila Hicks in 1966, working on her original tapestries at the Ford Foundation building on the East Side of Manhattan.  
BRUCE DAVIDSON / MAGNUM PHOTOS

So nearly 50 years later, she is back in the landmark building on East 43rd Street, having remade, not repaired, her two monumental works: One 30 feet 8 inches by 13 feet in the auditorium comprises 510 embroidered medallions; one 40 feet 2 inches by 9 feet 5 inches in the below-ground board room with 600 medallions.

They will be unveiled at a private reception on Wednesday.

“For 10 years, I’d been hearing about it: ‘What are we going to do?’ ” Ms. Hicks said. “The only thing I could do was roll up my sleeves and assemble a team.”

It is far from common for an artist to revisit the site of a commission to recreate the work of decades past. In Ms. Hicks’s case, the effort is particularly unusual.



Sheila Hicks today in front of the new tapestries at building.  
ELIZABETH LIPPMAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

She turned 80 in July. She lives in Paris. She had to finance much of the project herself. And at this stage in her career, she had nothing to prove.

“Even though everyone was against my doing this,” she said, “I thought it was a

great way to go.”

Initially, Ms. Hicks and the foundation consulted textile conservators, and considered contracting out the work to artisans in other countries. They also agonized over how to pay for it; Hicks pieces go for hundreds of thousands at auction. “If this were done completely commercially, the cost would be rather prohibitive,” said Darren Walker, the [Ford Foundation](#)’s president. “She knows that we’re a nonprofit organization, and that we would not be willing to pay the market price for a Sheila Hicks work of art. We couldn’t justify it.”

In the end, Ms. Hicks agreed to do the work pro bono, and Ford paid for the materials, shipping and hired labor.

The process — which took more than a year — turned out to be complex and bittersweet. Comparable materials had to be located. (The natural linen was found in Roubaix, France; the thread near Strasbourg, France.) New workers had to be hired; the originals are no longer around.

“It was full of sad memories,” Ms. Hicks said, “like taking a sea voyage without all the characters who were on the boat with you when you first saw the island.”

Ultimately, the team consisted of about a dozen people, including Ms. Hicks and her deputies: Dominique Pastor, the project leader, and Enrico Martignoni, the chief installer. The tapestries were reconstructed from scratch in Ms. Hicks’s Paris studio, with the thread pulled through from one side of the fabric to the other.

“You’re this close with a person for a year, it’s like a confessional,” Ms. Hicks said. “I give you the needle, you pull it through the linen, and you turn it back around and send it back to me.”

Mr. Walker said the finished pieces are as powerful as the originals. “It’s a poetic work of art that both has a wow factor, but also a depth,” he said. “It really draws you in. It’s both monumental and intimate at the same time.”

Ms. Hicks said the end effect should not be an individualistic statement, but the aura created by the geometric cohesion of the design and the interplay of color and texture.

“If you’re laying a wall of bricks, you’re not going to mess it up by bringing your personality,” she said. “The bricks have a natural beauty. This whole exercise is not an exercise in the artist expressing herself emotionally, except in a very subtle way. How do you feel when you’re sitting in here? When I’m sitting in here, I have a sense of well-being.”

“You don’t see a signature anywhere,” she added. “This is not meant in that spirit. After doing this for 60 years now, I think you can tell it’s mine.”

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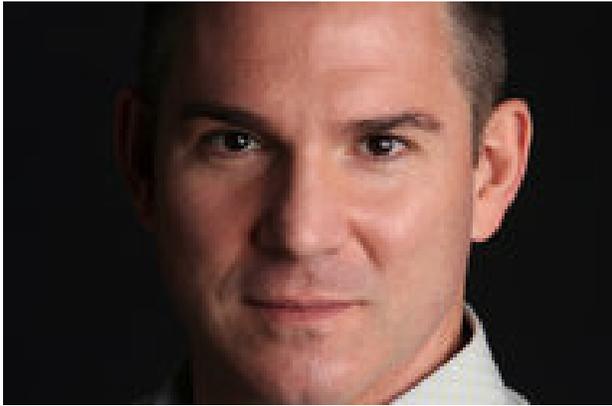
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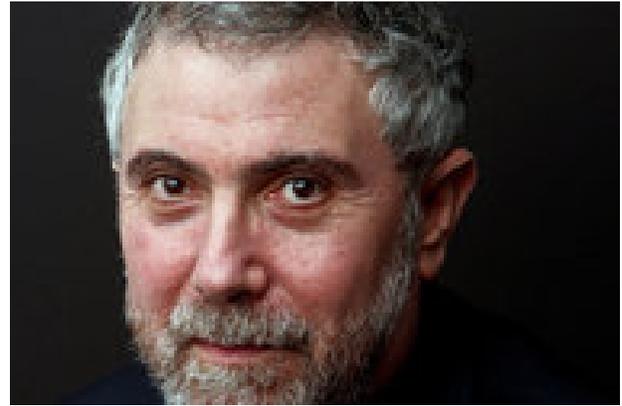
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