

Sheila Hicks

a biography

Timeline



Sheila Hicks prepares *Pillar of Inquiry/Supple Column*, 2013–14, for installation in the 2014 Whitney Biennial. (Photo by Cristóbal Zanutu)

Sheila Hicks was born in Hastings, Nebraska, in 1934. The eldest of three children, she and her family moved around frequently throughout her early childhood. At a young age, she visited the Detroit Art Institute, where the frescoes of Mexican artist Diego Rivera (1886–1957) inspired her to become an artist. After living in Texas, Florida, Missouri, and Michigan, Hicks’ family moved back to Nebraska. There, she spent time with her extended family, surrounded by three generations of seamstresses, knitters, and needle-workers.

Hicks went on to study painting at Yale University, beginning a period of intense growth and artistic discovery. Under the tutelage of professors including German-born artist Josef Albers (1888–1976), she learned technical and visual skills, such as color theory. Yet Hicks was an intensely curious young artist, leading her to enroll in classes outside the school of art. In a class on pre-Columbian culture, she was first introduced to the possibility of using textiles as her primary medium, forever broadening her horizons beyond her intended career as a painter. The artist’s professor, Dr. George Kubler (1912–1996), introduced her to pre-Incaic “mummy bundles,” colorful, woven cloth ancient indigenous peoples used to shroud their dead. Hicks began exploring weaving as an art form, and Albers introduced her to his wife, renowned Bauhaus textile artist Anni Albers (1899–1994). Anni Albers taught Hicks the vast potential of textiles, demonstrating that fabric and yarn need not be utilitarian and can instead function as aesthetic tools. Under Albers’ training, Hicks learned a technical finesse with weaving and fabric that she still uses today. She began small weavings on her pocket loom in order to practice her practical skills, calling these miniatures “minimes.” Hicks has continued to produce minimes throughout her entire career, and they provide insight into the skill and experimentation that is integral to her practice.

Hicks graduated from Yale with her bachelor’s degree in 1957 and spent the next year traveling through South America on a Fulbright scholarship. She began her journey in Venezuela, and moved through several other countries

before she finally settled in Santiago, Chile, to teach and work on her artistic practice. She described this time as a “sun-filled, yellow year”—referring to the warm climate and lively local color palette—and carried her diary and camera with her everywhere she went. On her journey she learned indigenous weaving techniques and absorbed the intense jewel tones of the landscape and art. At the conclusion of her travels, Hicks returned to Yale for her master’s degree in fine art and formally explored the weaving techniques and fiber arts she discovered during her studies abroad.



Sheila Hicks (American, active in France, b. 1934), *Tapis de Priere*, 1974, wool, 87 x 48 x 3 1/4 in. (221 x 121.9 x 8.3 cm), Courtesy Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York (Photo by Jason Wyche)



Sheila Hicks: *Foray into Chromatic zones*, 2015. (Photo by Cristóbal Zanutu)

Upon completion of her MFA in 1959, Hicks moved to Mexico and immersed herself in the burgeoning design scene there, befriending architect Luis Barragán (1902–1988) and artist Mathias Goeritz (1915–1990). In conversation with these friends and others, Hicks contemplated the kind of art she wanted to create, and began making monumentally-scaled works that responded to the spaces in which they were installed. Having completed commissions in buildings all over the world, architecture and design still informs her work.

Hicks traveled to Kozhikode, India, in 1966 to visit Commonwealth Trust, one of the oldest hand-weaving factories in the world, where she helped to develop designs for airlines, hotels, and government organizations. In 1971, the Moroccan government invited her to help reinvigorate their storied carpet-making industry. She designed textiles and carpets there, inspired by traditional craft and techniques, as well as by the symbolism of the prayer rug in Islamic tradition. Although Hicks has since moved away from textile design and focuses primarily on her own work, some of her schemes are still in production. She continues to travel and to embrace traditional approaches to textile that she encounters in new places. Inspiration from her daily life in Paris, where she has lived since 1964, also finds expression in Hicks’ work.



Sheila Hicks
(American, active in France, b. 1934)

Mandan Shrine

2016

linen, cotton, synthetic fibers, 118 1/2 x 53 1/2 in. (301 x 135.9 cm),
Museum purchase with funds from the Joslyn Art Group,
2016.11 (Photo by Colin Conces)

Sheila Hicks created *Mandan Shrine* specifically for Joslyn Art Museum’s 2016 survey of her work, *Sheila Hicks: Material Voices* (June 5–September 4). The artist pulled this work’s title from a watercolor by Swiss-born artist Karl Bodmer in the Museum’s collection. Bodmer documented the expedition through the North American interior between 1832–1834, with explorer and naturalist Prince Alexander Philipp Maximilian of Wied-Neuwied, Germany, in watercolors and drawings. Bodmer focused on depicting American Indian people and customs in his artwork, and in *Mandan Shrine*, he depicts a ceremonial structure related to Mandan beliefs about the afterlife. In Hicks’ work, she responds to this spiritual context in cotton and linen thread, binding the fibers into “ponytails”—a form she began using in 1967 for work included in an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. These linen cords are painstakingly wrapped with cotton embroidery thread, allowing Hicks to explore a meditative, repetitive gesture in the creation of these bundles. While fiber arts often are characterized as soft and fragile, Hicks rejects these labels for this particular work—rather, she explains, the silky embroidery cotton tames the linen’s husky, rough, strong qualities.



Karl Bodmer (Swiss, 1809–1893), *Mandan Shrine*, 1833, watercolor on paper, Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska, Gift of the Enron Art Foundation, 1986.49.386

Color is integral to Hicks’ practice, and the palettes of her artworks are carefully and deliberately chosen. When she begins to develop a new work, the artist sets colored threads on a table in the center of her studio. She lives with these colors for a period of time and uses the opportunity to edit and add threads of other colors. In *Mandan Shrine*, the bulk of the ponytails are natural linen thread, but closer inspection reveals a darker blue core in the center of these bundles that provides depth and dimension. The threads wrapping the ponytails, meanwhile, make use of the saturated hues that Hicks has long embraced. The shape of this work mimics that of a carpet or flat textile, but also provides the piece’s shape a certain amount of flexibility and unpredictability when installed.

Discussion Questions

- How do you think Sheila Hicks’ travels influenced her work?
- How does Hicks employ color in her work?
- How does architectural space affect how you see art?

Teachers: go to www.joslyn.org/education for this poster’s related academic standards and lesson plans.

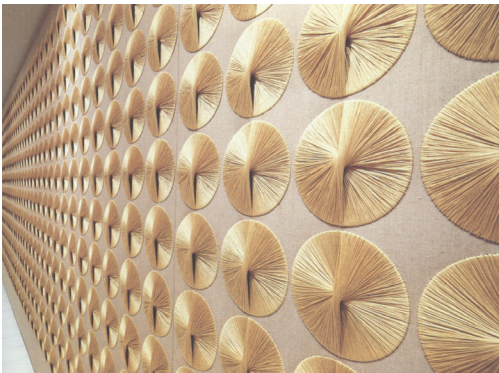
Timeline of Sheila Hicks' career:

- 1930
- 1934 Sheila Hicks was born on July 24 in Hastings, Nebraska
- 1940
- 1950
- 1953 Begins her undergraduate studies at Yale University
- 1957 Spends one year in South America on a Fulbright Scholarship
- 1959 Completes her MFA at Yale University; receives Fribourg Grant to paint in France
- 1960
- 1966 Receives the Ford Foundation commission
- 1970
- 1980
- 1990
- 1993 Receives the Fuji City Cultural Center commission
- 2000
- 2003 Creates *May I Have This Dance?* for the Target Corporation's headquarters
- 2010 Receives the Smithsonian Institution's Lifetime Achievement Award
- 2016 *Sheila Hicks: Material Voices* survey at Joslyn Art Museum
- 2017 Included in the Venice Biennale

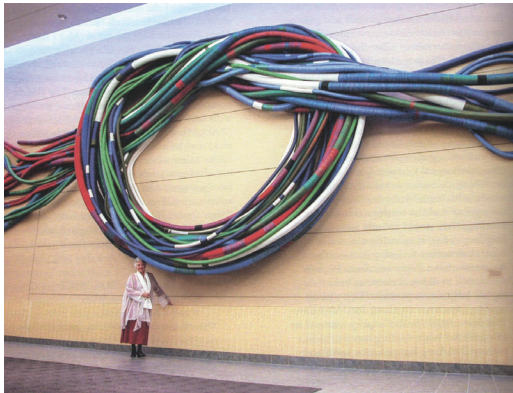
Background image: Sheila Hicks (American, active in France, b. 1934), *Predestined Color Wave II*, 2015, linen, 71 x 71 in. (180.3 x 180.3 cm), Courtesy of the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York (Photo by Jason Wyche)

The Artist and Architecture

During her time living in Mexico in 1959, Sheila Hicks became friends with architect Luis Barragán (1902–1988). He is known in the architectural canon for his buildings’ marriage of the modern “international style”—characterized by glass, steel, and industrial materials—and Mexico’s traditional warm, sunny colorful palette. Barragán fostered Hicks’ weaving practice, even when she was having personal and professional struggles that made working difficult. She created textiles for Barragán’s home, houses he was building, and even a convent he designed. Through these commissions, Hicks began to engage with space in a new way, breaking beyond the painting-like constraints of her minimes and transitioning to a more sculptural approach to fiber. During her time in Mexico City, Hicks also became friends with artist Mathias Goeritz (1915–1990), whose sculptures were intrinsically linked with his appreciation for architecture and informed by his own friendship with Barragán. Inspired by Barragán and Goeritz, Hicks began to contemplate something she had been interested in since her year abroad: the relationship between monumental works of art and the spaces in which they are placed. During her trip to Venezuela in 1957, she visited a building featuring an installation designed by American artist Alexander Calder (1898–1976), and became fascinated with the way his artworks could fundamentally alter how one experienced an architectural space.



Detail, Ford Foundation boardroom installation for her 1966 commission, New York City. (Photo © Bruce White, 2016)



Sheila Hicks with *May I Have This Dance?*, her 2003 commission for the Target Corp. headquarters in Minneapolis. (Photo by Cristóbal Zanutu)

In other commissions, such as the sculpture the artist created for Target’s headquarters in Minneapolis in 2003, Hicks further pushed the idea of sculptural intervention into architectural space. Titled *May I Have This Dance?*, this work consists of thread wrapped around plastic and cork tubing that the artist formed into the shape of a loose knot. After Target’s headquarters were remodeled in 2010, the work found new form when the artist split the work in two. She gave each a new title, and they were installed in two American museums—demonstrating Hicks’ continued ability to innovate. She pays close attention to the built environments in which her work will be displayed, demonstrating the influences of architects like Barragán and installation artists like Goeritz.

The Evolution of Fiber Arts

Known as a fiber arts pioneer, Sheila Hicks was among the first wave of artists using yarn, fabric, and textiles to create fine art, elevating them above craft. Weaving, in particular, has long been considered a gendered art form, performed primarily by women for centuries. As such, art using yarn, thread, and fabric were prized for their functionality over their artistic value. Beginning in the 1960s and into the 1970s, fiber arts began to find their way into the artistic canon. The social and political activism taking place, including the Civil Rights movement and the push for gender equality, gave rise to an anti-establishment and anti-materialist culture that spurned conformity. There was growing interest in ancient and traditional weaving, dyeing, and other global fiber techniques. Hicks and other artists looked to pre-Incaic weaving and dyeing techniques from Peru and were taken with their color and complexity. Of these kinds of textiles, the Paracas textile was particularly inspiring. A “mummy bundle” burial shroud known for its complex depictions of shamans and ritual, Paracas textiles are notable for their technical complexity and vivid color.

As feminist artists began to co-opt fiber arts into the mainstream arts media, Hicks was developing her own approach. In 1969, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, staged an exhibition of textiles titled *Wall Hangings* that helped cement fiber arts’ transition from craft into high art. Hicks’ work was included in this exhibition, establishing her as an innovator in the world of fiber arts. After this watershed exhibition, fiber artists began to experiment with more than just flat weavings. Hicks, particularly, was inspired by architecture and the domestic implications of fiber. Her work began to grow off of the wall, taking the form of sculptures or piles rather than flat tapestries. In the 1980s, fiber arts became more conceptual. In the 2000s, fiber has become a tool for political protest, with artists employing fiber’s gendered implications in service of social and political critique. In this way, fiber arts has evolved, while remaining charged with implications of gender and craft.



Nazca. Mantle (“*The Paracas Textile*”), 100–300 C.E. Cotton, camelid fiber, 24 5/8 x 58 11/16 in. (62.5 x 149 cm). Brooklyn Museum, John Thomas Underwood Memorial Fund, 38.121 (Photo by Brooklyn Museum)

Minimes

Throughout her prolific career, Sheila Hicks has continued to make small weavings on her pocket loom. She calls these works minimes (mih NEEMS). Since the artist was trained as a painter, the small, rectangular format and attention to color come naturally to her as a medium in which to experiment. She has used the same loom throughout her entire career, which she made from a painting stretcher and small nails at Yale School of Art. Minimes are not always purely made of yarn or thread; Hicks sometimes incorporates organic materials such as grass, seashells, feathers, or cornhusks. She frequently uses these materials that are normally discarded, giving them new life. Hicks often refers to minimes as sketches, as she is able to create them anywhere using the materials she has on hand, and since they allow her to play with color and texture without committing to large-scale decisions. These works offer insight into the artist’s process of creation and experimentation with material and form. In the minimes, Hicks’ progression from flat surfaces to three-dimensional objects is most apparent, and her training as a painter shines through in her use of color.



Images (left to right): Sheila Hicks (American, active France, b. 1934), *Emerging with Grace*, 2016, linen, cotton, silk, and shell, Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska, Museum purchase with funds from the Joslyn Art Museum Association Annual Gala 2016, 2016.12 (Photo by Cristóbal Zanutu); Hicks, *Foray*, 2015, linen, cotton, feather, 9 5/8 x 5 3/4 in. (24.4 x 14.6 cm), Courtesy the artist and Alison Jacques Gallery, London (Photo by Michael Brezinski)



SHEILA HICKS (American, active in France, b. 1934)

MANDAN SHRINE
2016, linen, cotton, synthetic fibers

JOSLYN ART MUSEUM® OMAHA, NEBRASKA
Museum purchase with funds from the
Joslyn Art Group, 2016.11