



Mariette Rousseau-Vermette: Journey of a Painter-weaver from the 1940s through the 1960s

ANNE NEWLANDS

When the internationally renowned Quebec artist Mariette Rousseau-Vermette (1926–2006) died in 2006 at the age of seventy-nine, she left behind a rich production of over 640 tapestries, many of which were created for prestigious commissions, such as the National Arts Centre, Ottawa (1968); the Eisenhower Theatre, John F. Kennedy Centre for the Performing Arts, Washington, D.C. (1971); Roy Thomson Hall, Toronto (1981); and the headquarters of Imperial Tobacco, Montreal (2002). Rousseau-Vermette exhibited widely throughout her career; she received prizes and honours, including Officer of the Order of Canada (1976); her work is also represented in public collections nationally and internationally. Despite this recognition, little has been written about her beginnings as an artist, the development of her identity as a painter-weaver, and the early years of her success as a modernist artist.

The term ‘painter-weaver’ (also ‘*peintre-lissier*’ and ‘*peintre-licier*’) began to be used in the popular press in Quebec in the mid-1960s to describe artists such as Rousseau-Vermette, her contemporary Micheline Beauchemin (1929–2009), and others who were trained as visual artists in fine art academies, embraced the aesthetics of visual art with its expressive emphasis on colour, line, shape and texture, and chose to weave, creating tapestries of their own design on a loom.¹ Given the centuries-old tradition of domestic weaving in Quebec, many Quebec artists who employed weaving to create autonomous works of art used this term to distinguish themselves from those who wove fabric for domestic and utilitarian purposes; critics who supported them adopted the term as well. Additionally, for artists who wove, identifying themselves as ‘painter-weavers’ signaled their medium as an important part of their artistic identity and community. Unlike Europe, where tapestry production had been established since the Middle Ages, in Quebec, woven tapestries made on native soil did not appear until the mid-twentieth century.

Detail, Mariette Rousseau-Vermette, *Printemps*, 1961, wool tapestry, 210 × 257 cm, Collection Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec. (Photo: Jean-Guy Kérouac)

In the tapestry traditions of Renaissance Europe, artists or designers created ‘cartoons’, drawings or paintings, that would be woven into a tapestry by a specialized weaver or members of a weaver’s guild. By the mid-nineteenth century in Britain, William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement advocated the creation of textiles that were not imitations of paintings, but were, as textile historian Virginia Troy has stated, “independent objects that related to other objects through the decidedly non-painterly, flat and decorative style of art nouveau.”² Opposed to the categories that separated classes of art, Morris embraced textiles because they could function both as utilitarian objects in the decoration of an interior, as well as pictorial expression. Morris and his artists, however, continued to employ professional weavers to render their designs. It was not until the founding of the Bauhaus in Germany in 1919, that artists such as Anni Albers, Ethel Mairet, Marion Strengel and others, were taught the techniques of weaving, enabling them to execute their own compositions as samples for industry, but also as autonomous works of art. Both the Arts and Crafts movement, and the Bauhaus “broke down the barriers between the major and minor arts, placing the emphasis on the originality of the work and recognizing tapestry weaving as an art in its own right.”³ This spirit of inclusivity that blurred the boundaries between fine art and other forms of art was also characteristic of the interdisciplinary Canadian art scene of the 1960s. On the cusp of the “Fibre Revolution” that would see textile artists experiment with new materials and push the limits of traditional weaving off of the wall,⁴ Canadian painter-weaver contemporaries of Rousseau-Vermette such as Beauchemin, Charlotte Lindgren (1931–), Krystyna Sadowska (1912–), Helen Frances Gregor (1921–1989), and others explored these new possibilities; their works were reviewed by art journals and exhibited in art galleries and museums, confirming the status of their handmade textile creations as art.

In addition to her identity as a painter-weaver, Rousseau-Vermette’s work was also rooted in a modernist context in which textile artists looked to the nature of the materials and their method of construction for inspiration. Furthermore, her training as a visual artist, her embrace of the visual language of abstraction, and her ambition to create work in collaboration with architects were also hallmarks of modernism. Writing on the status of textiles in the first half of the twentieth century, Troy affirmed that textiles had “moved to the center of modernist theoretical dialogues and debates, as they began to embody the ways in which art, craft and architecture could be fused into decorative and architectural programmes.”⁵ Indeed, for Rousseau-Vermette, art and craft were not two concepts at odds in the creation of her tapestries, but were rather a necessary marriage of aesthetic vision and conceptual knowledge of the materials and the processes of weaving.

Interviewed by the craft historian Sandra Alföldy in 2005, Rousseau-Vermette insisted that “a textile artist must not be taught to be just a weaver, but also a designer and an artist.”⁶

This paper explores the development of Rousseau-Vermette’s career as a painter-weaver from the 1940s through the 1960s. It examines her relationship to the art and craft of weaving in Quebec in the 1930s and 1940s, her artistic training and influences, the Quebec art milieu in the 1950s and 1960s as defined by the aesthetics of geometric abstraction of the Montreal Plasticiens, and the critical reception of her work in the 1960s. It argues that Rousseau-Vermette’s success as a modernist artist derived from her embrace of geometric abstraction as her primary visual vocabulary, an approach to weaving that involved a modernist truth to materials and a shunning of excess ornamentation, and her collaborations with architects who sought her powerful and meticulously woven tapestries as complements to the stark austerity of modern architecture.

Mariette Rousseau – the Formative Years

For generations, weaving has been done in nearly all French-Canadian families; so it was natural for me to be interested in it from my youth. More advanced studies enabled me to see the contribution of contemporary painting and possibility of expression through tapestry.⁷

In the early years of the twentieth century, members of Montreal’s Women’s Art Society travelled along the south shore of the St. Lawrence and noted that many domestic arts were disappearing due to the prevalence of mail order catalogues that brought manufactured goods to distant towns and villages. In 1906, Alice Peck (1855–1943) and May Phillips (1856–1937), the leading women of the Canadian Handicrafts Guild in Montreal, embarked on a crusade to resurrect and promote traditional Quebec textiles and handicrafts. In 1910, Marius Barbeau (1883–1969), an anthropologist and ethnologist with the Museum Branch of the Geological Survey of Canada (later the Museum of Man) became an active proponent of Quebec folklore, culture and textiles. In partnership with a Canadian Pacific Railway publicist, John Murray Gibbon, Barbeau organized The Canadian Folk Song and Handicraft Festival in Quebec City in 1927, to celebrate the art, craft and music of Quebec.⁸

In 1930, responding to an economic crisis made worse in rural areas where crop failure brought people to the brink of starvation, the Quebec Government, a leader in Canada in the promotion of textiles, established a Department of Handicrafts under the province’s Ministry of Agriculture and appointed Oscar Bériau as its director.⁹ At the same time, the Ministry’s

creation of the École Provinciale des Arts Domestiques in Quebec City introduced nuns and other women teachers to weaving, spinning, and rug hooking in order to expand the provincial teaching ranks for these skills. Artists from the United States and Europe supervised their work, directing their patterns, products, and aesthetic decisions in order to support the province's focus on creating a successful commercial industry that perpetuated traditional Quebec handicrafts.¹⁰ Writing in 1933, soon after the founding of The Provincial School of Handicrafts, Bériau insisted that, "rural arts must be truly Canadian in execution . . . and be made to harmonize [with] the architecture of our typical habitant farms."¹¹ The production of handmade textiles supplied the domestic market and at the same time kept old traditions alive in the face of machine-made commodities.¹²

Thus by the time of Mariette Rousseau's birth in 1926 in Trois-Pistoles, Quebec, a small town on the south shore of the Saint Lawrence River, hand weaving was widespread both as a pastime and a necessity, especially in rural areas.

Rousseau's mother, Corinne Bélanger (ca. 1880–ca. 1929) was a painter who died when Mariette was two years old. Her father, Joseph Hervé Rousseau (1877–1964), was a celebrated notary and a musician; he founded and directed the local brass band, and encouraged his children's education and lives beyond their small town.¹³ He also organized a program whereby English Canadians and Americans interested in learning French could live with local families. Perhaps to assist in his own family's access to English, he subscribed to *The Globe and Mail* and *Life* magazine, a gesture that would later prove significant for his youngest daughter.¹⁴ The gift of a small loom, presented to Rousseau at the age of twelve, launched her life-long passion for weaving.

The Quebec government's support for traditional textiles was sustained throughout the 1930s. In 1939, it established a centre for carpet and tapestry hooking in the Charlevoix region on the north shore of the St. Lawrence at Pointe-au-Pic, under the direction of artist Georges-Édouard Tremblay (1902–1987). About twenty women students boarded at Tremblay's school-workshop, where they learned the skills of rug hooking and produced hooked tapestries. They worked directly from paintings by Tremblay that featured images of picturesque farms and a sentimental view of pre-industrial rural life in Quebec.¹⁵ In the same year, and again in 1940, exhibitions of domestic weaving held in collaboration with the Canadian Handicraft Guild on Île Sainte-Hélène recognized the resurgence of traditional crafts. In 1942 Bériau proudly reported on the success of the "Craft Revival in Quebec;" he described the legions of teachers who had travelled throughout the province

teaching weaving at community centres, reaching 800 Cercles de Fermières (Farm Women's Clubs) and 110 branches of Women's Institutes, with the result that there were "now 60,000 looms in rural Quebec and 100,000 spinning wheels."¹⁶ However, as Sandra Alföldy has observed, "the anonymity of the traditional textile artisan was soon to be overshadowed by modern art's insistence on recognized producers, and the successful negotiation of a space for textiles within the modernist art world."¹⁷ In addition, the increasing numbers of interior design studios, operated by weavers such as Karen Bulow (1899–1982) who opened her studio in Montreal in the early 1930s,¹⁸ and Irène Auger (1905–2003), whose Quebec City studio opened in 1940, helped to popularize the taste for handmade fabrics and individually hooked rugs.¹⁹

The late 1930s and early 1940s were also auspicious years for modernist art in Quebec. In 1939, due to the impending war, painter John Lyman (1886–1967) returned to Montreal after studies in Paris at the Atelier Matisse, and twenty-four years abroad. In the same year, he founded the Contemporary Arts Society, an association of artists committed to the ideas of European modernism. Frustrated by the conservative teaching at the École des Beaux-Arts that shunned the work of the Post-Impressionists, Fauves, and Cubists, these artists embraced Lyman's dictum that "the essential qualities of a work of art lie in the relationships of form to form and colour to colour as carriers of aesthetic feeling."²⁰ Painter Alfred Pellán's (1906–1988) return to Quebec in 1940, after fourteen years in Paris, was another boon to modernism. Retrospectives of his work in Quebec and Montreal featured boldly coloured, quasi-abstractions influenced by the work of Matisse and Picasso and caused a stir in the Quebec art world. Beyond these advances in modernist figurative art, in 1942, painter Paul-Émile Borduas (1905–1960), then a drawing instructor at the École du Meuble in Montreal, exhibited forty-five gouaches, which revealed his interest in surrealist theories of automatism and painting without preconceived ideas. These radical notions expressed a desire for new aesthetic freedoms and attracted the attention of younger Montreal artists who sought to break with conservative traditions and to express the world of dreams and the subconscious.

For the development of a future painter-weaver however, the bridge between an artisanal approach to weaving and modernist art in Quebec was still under construction. A notable exception was the transformation in 1941 of Alfred Pellán's painting *The Juggler* into a hooked rug by Thérèse Lafrance, a weaver at the École des Beaux-Arts de Québec.²¹ Although it followed the Tremblay model mentioned earlier, with an artisan executing the artist's composition, Pellán's partnership with Lafrance is significant for its introduction of modern, semi-abstract imagery into a traditional craft. Gaby

Pinsonneault in Montreal would follow suite in the 1950s, and render the abstract designs of Fernand Leduc (1916–), Louis Belzile (1929–), and others into hooked rugs; however, Mariette Rousseau-Vermette would be among the earliest to *weave* the designs of abstract artists.

L'École des Beaux-Arts de Québec

In 1944, Rousseau enrolled at the École des Beaux-Arts in Quebec City, a practical choice given its relative proximity to Trois-Pistoles and the company of relatives, both from her mother's family and her older brothers who were studying at Laval. In addition, the school offered a wide range of courses that included painting, sculpture, graphic arts, interior decoration, ceramics, enamelling and weaving. While prominent artists such as Jean Paul Lemieux (1904–1990) taught at the school during Rousseau's tenure, it is known that her studies with the painter Jean Dallaire (1916–1965), who began teaching there in 1946, were seminal.²² Dallaire, a popular and devoted teacher, who refrained from theorizing about figuration or abstraction, encouraged his students to explore and find their own way. While Dallaire's previous studies in France and promotion of early twentieth-century modernism through his stylistic emulation of the work of artists such as Picasso and Braque would have been stimulating, his enthusiasm for tapestries designed by the French painter Jean Lurçat, would certainly have struck a chord with Rousseau.²³

In 1947, the school commissioned Dallaire to produce a series of mural sized paintings featuring allegories of the different courses taught at the school: *Les Arts plastiques*, *La Publicité et la Décoration*, and *La Céramique et le Tissage*. The frontality, flatness and whimsical character of Dallaire's figures animated by non-naturalistic use of colour recalled the dream-like stylized figures that populated tapestries designed by Lurçat and woven in the Aubusson ateliers in France. Known as the father of “la nouvelle tapisserie,” Lurçat was recognized for creating a renaissance of the art of tapestry by encouraging modern artists to create cartoons for the Aubusson ateliers. There is no evidence that Rousseau herself aspired to make tapestries in the style of Lurçat or Dallaire's painted works. Their importance to her development lies in their example of freedom to explore modern imagery on a large scale, either painted or woven.

In addition to her lessons in painting and drawing at the École des Beaux-Arts, Rousseau's exercise books with woven textile samples produced in the Atelier de Tissage between 1944 and 1948, confirm her early mastery of a wide range of pattern and weaving techniques. Rousseau studied with weaver Irène Beaudin whom she acknowledged as an excellent technician who helped students to appreciate the importance of structure.²⁴ However, as Dallaire

lamented in a letter to Lurçat in 1948, in Canada, weavers were still ignorant of the fine art of tapestry and scarcely knew anything of the principles or qualities that governed it.²⁵ While many of Rousseau's fellow students would later travel to France to learn the art of tapestry, she looked to the United States, inspired by an issue of *Life* magazine in which an article titled "Top Weaver" introduced her to the innovative Dorothy Liebes studio in San Francisco. Interviewed many years later, Rousseau acknowledged, "I saw an article in *Life* magazine saying 'Textiles were dull. Now they are becoming interesting.' It was about her, I had to know why she wanted to make them lively – so I went."²⁶ In the article, illustrated with coloured images of Liebes's wool filled studio, details of woven fabrics, looms and assistants, Rousseau would have learned about the scale of Liebes's operation, which produced over 2,500 sample swatches a year for clients that included private couturiers, architects, and industry, as well as Liebes's innovations with materials, and her "prophetic instinct for trends in the colour field."²⁷

In 1948, the year Rousseau departed for the United States, the art of tapestry was beginning to acquire a more prominent profile in Quebec. In May, Jean-Marie Gauvreau (1903–1970), head of the *École du Meuble* arranged for an exhibition of historical and contemporary French tapestries at the Hotel de Ville in Montreal. It included seventeenth-century Gobelin tapestries as well as Jean Lurçat's *Summer*, produced in 1932 at L'Aubusson, France.²⁸ In addition, the provincial government initiated the *Concours artistique de la province de Québec*, the Annual Arts Competition of the Province of Quebec, a generous monetary prize that recognized excellence in the decorative arts, as well as in painting and sculpture.

Studies in California: 1948–1949

Following her graduation from the *École des Beaux-Arts* in 1948, Rousseau, who at the time spoke little English, travelled to San Francisco hoping to find a job at the Dorothy Liebes studio. To help cover her costs, she taught French in exchange for room and board.²⁹

Dorothy Wright Liebes (1899–1972) was born in California and learned to weave at Hull House, Chicago; she continued to weave at home to fund her studies at the University of California (BA, 1923), California School of Fine Arts (1926), and Columbia University (MA, 1929). In 1929, she travelled to Paris where she studied textile design at the Paul Rodier Studio. Rodier was a proponent of the constructive weaving process by which textured, multi-hued patterns were created by the directions and luminous quality of the threads rather than by surface decoration. Returning to San Francisco in 1930, she married Leon Liebes, and by 1937, opened a professional studio where she

produced boldly textured and vibrantly coloured textiles that often integrated unusual materials such as feathers, plastics, and bamboo; decorators and architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright, were her primary clients. By 1938, her studio employed seventeen female and male weavers, some of whom continued to work with her for the duration of her business.³⁰

Self-described as an “artist-designer,” Liebes “consciously chose to make textiles the outlet of her creative expression.”³¹ Furthermore, as a confident businesswoman making one-of-a-kind pieces for architects, Liebes would have been an important model for the young Rousseau as she speculated about her future as a painter-weaver. Sometime in 1948, the year that Rousseau arrived in San Francisco, Liebes moved to Washington, D.C., and by 1949, she was living in New York where she opened another studio. She did, however, continue to assert her style and control over the projects in the San Francisco workshop through occasional cross-country trips and extensive correspondence with trusted employees. After some initial difficulties in securing a position in the workshop, Rousseau later spoke very warmly of the year spent in Liebes’s studio assisting in the weaving of curtains, learning professional techniques and in a typical Liebes style, weaving unusual materials such as wood into textiles.³² During her American sojourn, Rousseau also took classes at the California College of Arts and Crafts, Oakland.

In addition to her experience in Liebes’s studio, Rousseau may also have been aware through the popular press, or through Liebes herself, of the work of the celebrated German artist-weaver and textile designer, Anni Albers whose work was presented in the first-ever solo exhibition of art textiles at the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1949. Following the closing of the Bauhaus in 1933, Albers and her husband, the painter Josef Albers, along with many other German artists and architects, had moved to the United States, bringing with them the art and design ideas central to international Constructivism. In the realm of weaving, this meant an adherence to the concept of “truth to materials” in the production of “rationally produced patterns determined by the horizontal and vertical structures of weaving as well as by the natural hues and textures of fibre.”³³ Commenting on her method years later, Albers wrote, “I worked with a weaver’s concern with threads as an artistic vehicle and I was interested greatly in the technique and discipline of the craft . . . In weaving, one deals with the surface quality of the threads – rough, smooth, glossy, shiny . . . The medium is a force that stimulates an artist’s productive energies.”³⁴ Like Liebes and Albers, Rousseau would also embrace the characteristics and the limitations of the medium as conditions with which to create her art.

Other European émigrés, such as the Finnish weaver Loja Saarinen and German textile designer Marianne Strengell, may also have attracted Rousseau's attention. Saarinen and Strengell both worked in collaboration with the architect Eliel Saarinen at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan and they broke new ground as professional artists creating modernist textiles with designs that reflected the inherent structure of weaving itself.

The Montreal Years 1949–1951

Upon her return to Canada in 1949, Rousseau settled in Montreal and worked briefly as a designer for a textile company. She also worked with interior designers, such as Delisle and Sabourin, Chicoutimi, many of whom were associated with artistic and theatrical groups, and wove exclusive fabrics for fashion designers and decorators.³⁵ In this capacity, Rousseau often visited local Montreal galleries in search of modern hand-crafted objects to complement clients' contemporary interiors. Such excursions led to a meeting and subsequent friendship with Montreal artist Claude Vermette (1930–2006), whose colourful abstract paintings and boldly shaped ceramics she admired.³⁶ Through Vermette, Rousseau met the young artists associated with Paul-Émile Borduas and the Automatistes who in 1948 had signed the manifesto, *Refus global*, a passionate call for new social, religious, and aesthetic freedoms in the conservative Church-dominated society of Quebec. As art historian Rose-Marie Arbour explains, the spirit of liberation promoted by Borduas and the Automatistes also encouraged and fostered autonomy for many of the female signatories to the *Refus global*, artists such as Françoise Sullivan (1925–), Marcelle Ferron (1924–2001), and Madeleine Arbour (1923–). As a means of expression, automatism was a tool for subjective and emotional emancipation that in turn inspired the creativity of these artists as well as other women artists emerging on the scene.³⁷ Although, Rousseau did not emulate the gestural, tachiste effects of Automatiste painting in her work, the example of Borduas and his followers as artists who took their professions seriously and dedicated their lives to art, was both inspirational and influential. In particular, Rousseau befriended Automatiste painters Fernand Leduc (1916–) and Jean-Paul Mousseau (1927–1991) who would provide designs for her early tapestries.

In January 1952, Rousseau, Vermette, and a group of artist friends travelled to Europe to explore the contemporary art scene and in Rousseau's case, to visit weaving studios. They toured France, Italy, Spain, Denmark, Sweden and Finland where Rousseau became particularly interested in Scandinavian

textile design. In October, Rousseau and Claude Vermette returned to Montreal; in November they married and moved to Sainte-Adèle, in the Laurentians north of Montreal, where Claude Vermette had been invited to teach at the Centre d'art de Sainte-Adèle.

Rousseau-Vermette: The Painter-weaver and the Dawn of the 1960s

*A tapestry expert may use a variety of materials, and by means of highly developed techniques, employ these materials intelligently. My quest is simple: the loom and instruments I use have their requirements and possibilities. I want above all to find quality in the colour, the texture and the arrangement of masses.*³⁸

The early years in Sainte-Adèle were marked by the birth of their first child in 1953, and Rousseau-Vermette's desire to forge her own path as an artist. Synthesizing the impact of her European travels, the contemporary art milieu, and the enduring influence of the natural surroundings of mountains, lakes and forests, Rousseau-Vermette returned to her low-warp loom, unravelling her earlier tapestries and reusing the wool to make new ones. In addition, to help make ends meet, she taught tapestry classes at Centre d'art de Sainte-Adèle, and wove and sold men's neck ties (Fig. 1) through commercial establishments in Montreal and Toronto under her own label, *Marver* – a shortened version of her name. She also continued to create fabric for local fashion designers such as Jacques de Montjoye (1928–).³⁹ Interviewed years later about this period, Rousseau-Vermette reported that it was through her husband Claude, who was working with architects on ceramic projects, that she too became acquainted with them, and they in turn, became interested in her work. The benefits of this partnership would later be reciprocated, as architects attracted to Rousseau-Vermette's tapestries would discover the ceramics of her husband.⁴⁰

While it is hoped that future research may uncover work from the early 1950s, the earliest recorded tapestry in Rousseau-Vermette's meticulously kept *carnet noir* is dated 1956 and was woven from a design by Fernand Leduc. Although Leduc had originally been a follower of Borduas and had painted in a spontaneous, gestural fashion, by the early 1950s, he and a small group of artists known as "Les Plasticiens" pursued a more ordered form of expression based on a defined juxtaposition of colours and geometric shapes that sought a purification of the plastic elements.⁴¹ The clarity of Leduc's composition and the angularity of many of the forms in his design for *Rencontre totémique à Chilkat*, 1956 (Fig. 2) were well suited to the grid of the loom and in 1957, Leduc and Rousseau-Vermette were awarded first prize in the decorative arts section of the Annual Arts Competition sponsored by the Province of



1 | Mariette Rousseau-Vermette, *Handwoven ties with Marver label*, Estate of Mariette Rousseau-Vermette. (Photo: Courtesy of the author)

Quebec. Exhibited at L'Actuelle galerie d'art non-figuratif in October 1956, along with abstract paintings by Leduc, this work was an important first step in Rousseau-Vermette's public association with the aesthetics of abstraction; furthermore, it demonstrated the high quality of her work as a weaver and her sensibility in rendering abstraction in wool. According to Suzanne and Laurent Lamy, Leduc's motivation for having his work translated into wool was to make his new, more radically abstract works more inviting and accessible to the public.⁴² As Virginia Troy has stated, textiles were "the ideal cross-over medium in modernist attempts to erase the social and visual boundaries separating art from craft, art from industrial design, and elite from popular culture."⁴³

A woman of prodigious energy with a strong dedication to research and expanding the horizons of her art, Rousseau-Vermette was committed to travel in order to keep abreast of contemporary art movements. In 1958, she journeyed again to Europe. In Italy, an exhibition of the meditative work of



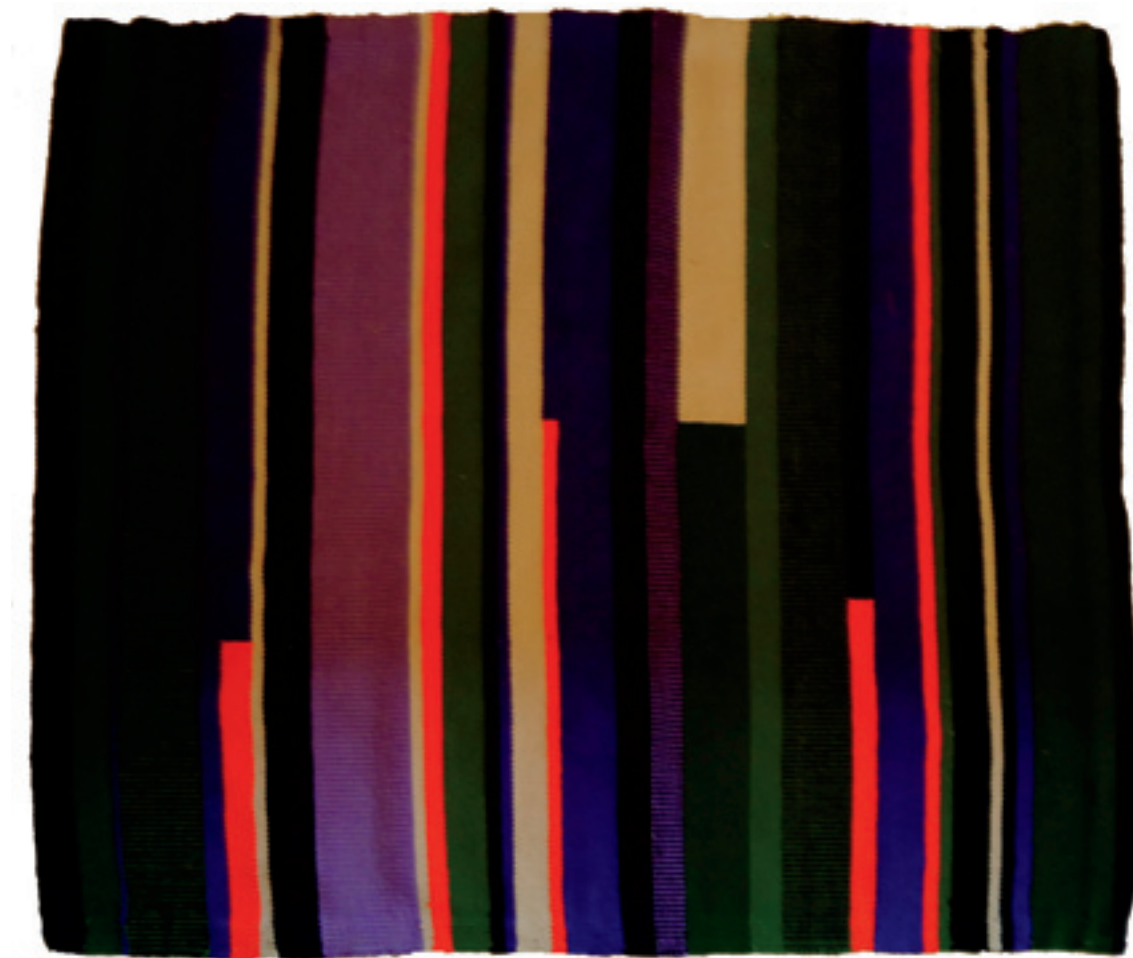
2 | Fernand Leduc and Mariette Rousseau-Vermette, *Rencontre totémique à Chilkat*, 1956, after a cartoon by Fernand Leduc, wool tapestry, 212.4 × 137.2 cm, collection Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec. (Photo: Jean-Guy Kérouac, © Fernand Leduc/SODRAC, 2011)

the American abstract painter Mark Rothko was particularly inspiring, and triggered the use of a brushed-wool technique that would allow a softened blending of colours and a sense of inner light in her tapestries. She was also particularly impressed by the art of weaving in Finland, perhaps finding in their explicit use of wool and rough textures, a response to the ruggedness of the Finnish landscape that she also experienced in the Quebec Laurentians. In the same year, along with the birth of a second son, the artist produced three more tapestries, one of which was designed from a cartoon by Mousseau.

In 1959, Rousseau-Vermette continued her partnerships with artists with whom she shared an aesthetic based on “Plasticien” principles; she produced tapestries with precise compositional structures, isolated bands of colour and geometric shapes from cartoons designed by Mousseau, Guido Molinari (1933–2004), Louis Belzile, Jean Goguen (1927–1989), and Claude Vermette. In July of the same year, she received a letter from the National Gallery of Canada inviting her to participate in a travelling exhibition (Canadian Artists Series III, *Beauchemin, Vermette*) with the Quebec painter-weaver, Micheline Beauchemin. The Gallery’s letter stated that the exhibition’s purpose was “to make Canada’s artists known outside their own regions in areas where significant exhibitions of Canadian art do not usually travel.”⁴⁴ Each artist was invited to submit ten works, a statement, and a short biography as notes for the slim catalogue that would accompany the exhibition. While the Gallery had originally implied that the exhibition would tour smaller towns in Ontario, the final itinerary included eleven venues. The exhibition opened in January 1960 at McMaster University, toured five cities in Ontario, and then continued across the country with stops in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and finally closed at the Vancouver Art Gallery early in 1961. The Gallery’s press release stated that the tapestries of both artists “raise weaving from a craft to the level of fine art.”⁴⁵

It is difficult to assess the impact or reception of the exhibition from a modest collection of clippings that mostly repeat phrases from the Gallery’s press release and published artists’ statements. However, black and white installation photographs taken at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen’s University, Kingston, show the large scale and compositional vigour of the geometric abstraction in Rousseau-Vermette’s works.⁴⁶ Three of the tapestries in the exhibition were designed by Rousseau-Vermette and six were designed by other artists.⁴⁷ As Rousseau-Vermette explained her approach,

The techniques I use respond adequately to the particular genius and creative expression of each artist. In view of that, it is not for sheer whim that Mousseau expresses himself in long wool, that Molinari



3 | Mariette Rousseau-Vermette, *Noirs, violets, blancs, verts*, 1959, wool tapestry, 116 × 143 cm, Estate of Mariette Rousseau-Vermette. (Photo: Courtesy of the author)

and Goguen demand well defined planes and volumes, that Vermette requires warm, brushed wool, and Belzile needs smooth masses.⁴⁸

While Rousseau-Vermette did not elaborate her approach to the design of *Noirs, violets, blancs, verts*, 1959 (Fig. 3), with its rhythmic vertical bands of black, green, and purple relieved by areas of red and white, it clearly demonstrates her confident mastery of the formal geometric language of the “Plasticiens.” It is important to note that from this time on, Rousseau-Vermette would be the sole designer of her tapestries; thus she achieved the status of an autonomous artist, and specifically, a painter-weaver. Like artists such as Dorothy Liebes and Anni Albers before her, she would create her own cartoons using oil pastel to sketch out the shapes and disposition of colour and form that would determine her selection of wool and other fibres. These drawings were usually accompanied by samples of the yarn to be used and the meticulous measurements necessary to calculate the enlargement of the drawing to the loom.

In 1961, the Canadian Handicraft Guild awarded Rousseau-Vermette 2nd prize for *Tapestry #10*, 1959, one of the tapestries that had been included in the National Gallery of Canada exhibition. Also in the early 1960s, Rousseau-Vermette established a relationship with the spinners and weavers on the Île-aux-Coudres, 60 km east of Quebec City in the St. Lawrence River. Proud to create work with wool from Canadian sources that would better support her response to nature and her ambitions to create work rooted in native soil, Rousseau-Vermette had the wool dyed to her specifications at the École des Textiles de Saint-Hyacinthe. The provincial Ministère de la Jeunesse de la province de Québec supported this endeavour and saw these collaborations as a way to perpetuate the learning of traditional handicraft skills by a younger generation.⁴⁹

The 1960s: Exhibitions and Collaborations with Architects

Between 1961 and 1969, Rousseau-Vermette produced approximately 220 tapestries, ranging in size from small maquettes of a square metre, to enormous theatre curtains made with the assistance of other weavers and commercial establishments. The titles of most of her works allude to the seasons, the natural environment, and colour harmonies; they attest to the enduring inspiration of nature and her commitment to an abstract visual language. While small-scale private commissions outnumber the larger-sized public ones, Rousseau-Vermette’s many collaborations with architects were signs of tapestry’s rising star in the context of modernist architecture whose stark concrete walls and austere corridors called for the colour and warmth of

modern tapestry. In the 1950s, textile artists such as Karen Bulow and Helen Frances Gregor had begun to work on large-scale productions with architects. Other artists followed in the 1960s, including Carole Sabiston (1939–) and Joanna Staniszakis (1944–) in British Columbia, Charlotte Lindgren (1931–) in Nova Scotia, and Beauchemin and Rousseau-Vermette in Quebec.⁵⁰ While the enthusiasm for modernist architecture was indeed a national phenomenon, it was most pronounced in Montreal where large public structures such as Place Ville Marie and Place des Arts, both designed in 1963, set the stage for the modernist achievements of Expo 67.⁵¹

With the dawn of the Quiet Revolution under the leadership of Jean Lesage, the early years of the 1960s were marked by a liberal humanism that embraced the arts. In 1961, the Quebec Government created Le Ministère des Affaires culturelles, recognizing the world of arts and letters for its political value and its association with national identity. In the same year, a group of young artists that included Mousseau, Rita Letendre (1928–), and Claude Vermette, petitioned the Quebec Government to more actively support artists through the creation of grants, financial assistance for exhibitions, studios, as well as a policy promoting the integration of art in architecture.⁵² This interdisciplinary spirit, combined with a building boom in the city of Montreal and across the country, also opened the door for increased collaboration between artists and architects; by 1965, it took the form of provincial legislation ruling that one percent of a public building's budget must be spent on art. Rousseau-Vermette's use of a geometric abstract language in the creation of her tapestries ensured her appeal to modernist architects who shared her sparse visual aesthetic in their large angular structures of glass, steel and concrete. The international recognition brought by her inclusion in the first and subsequent exhibitions of the Biennale Internationale de la Tapisserie in Lausanne, Switzerland, would also contribute to her visibility and success.

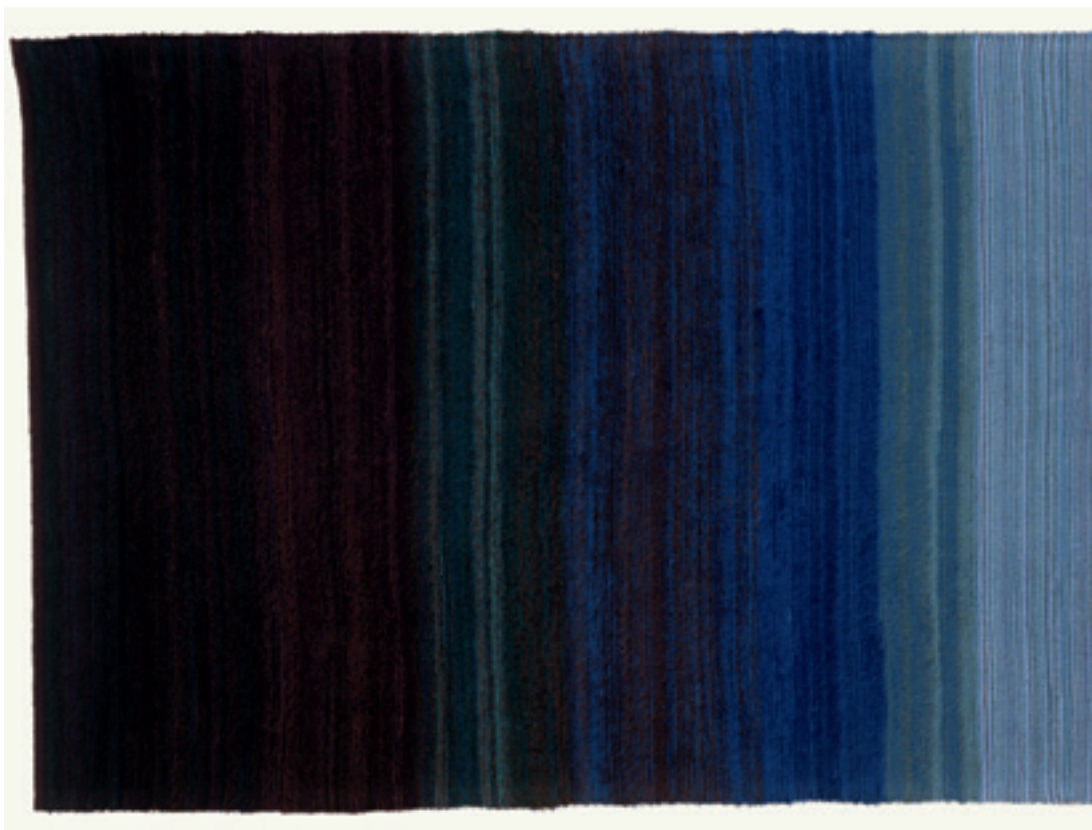
Although recognition for Rousseau-Vermette's work in the 1960s came both from art galleries and craft organizations, newspaper articles and catalogues reviewed to date confirm that critical attention came mainly from the art world.⁵³ Art museums had long embraced tapestry as "high art" due to its historical association with allegorical and narrative painting and like painting, tapestry was also displayed on the privileged position of the wall. In addition, the American Craft Council lobbied for the status of craft as art, and by 1964, at the First World Congress of Craftsmen, the American art critic Harold Rosenberg declared that, "the fine artist and the inventive craftsman are indistinguishable from one another."⁵⁴ Acknowledging this recognition of craft as art at this highly influential gathering, Alföldy writes, "the American

Craft Council and the World Crafts Council sought to institutionalize the modernist narrative.”⁵⁵ Just a year later, the 1965 Canadian Conference of the Arts was held in Rousseau-Vermette’s home town of Sainte-Adèle, Quebec. Montcrieff Williamson, the first director of the new Confederation Centre Art Gallery in Charlottetown, called for excellence, inventiveness, and professional standards for Canadian craft and suggested that fine crafts should be on an equal footing with other forms of artistic production in Canada. Indeed, in his selection of work for the Canadian Fine Crafts exhibition held two years later at Expo 67, Williamson sought to raise Canadian craft to international standards; he included both traditional and contemporary works, and actively supported “more conceptual work” such as Rousseau-Vermette’s abstract tapestries.⁵⁶

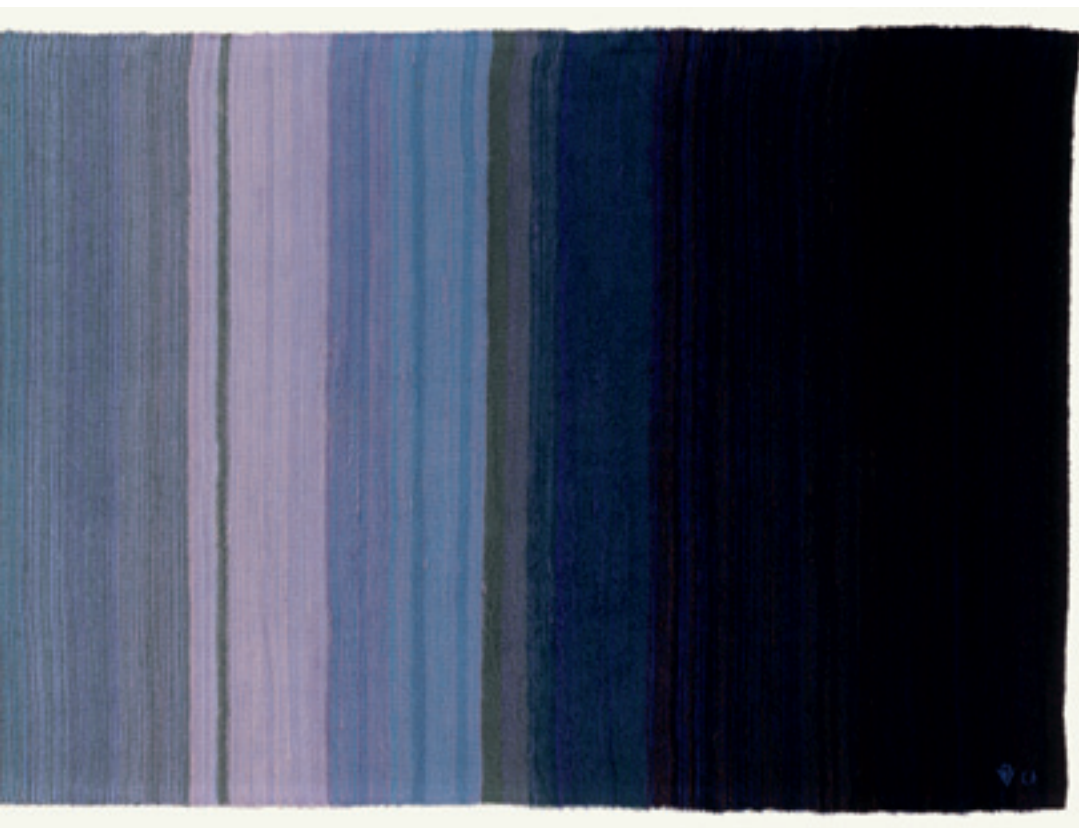
As a detailed examination of Rousseau-Vermette’s vast output over a single decade would be beyond the scope of this paper, a selective look at works produced between the years 1961 and 1969 will offer insights into her aesthetic explorations and commitment to geometric abstraction, examine her success in exhibiting tapestries nationally and internationally, and recognize her accomplishments in integrating tapestry with contemporary architecture.

In the autumn of 1961, Jean-Paul Mousseau invited Rousseau-Vermette to join him in an exhibition at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. Organized in the context of the Museum’s “Gallery XII Exhibitions,” these were two-person shows and the artists paid for both the exhibition space and opening reception – right down to the liquor license.⁵⁷ Rousseau-Vermette exhibited eight tapestries, all of her own composition. Rather than imitate painting as she had in the past, in these works she unleashed her creative passion for weaving, producing large-scale tapestries such as *Hiver canadien*, 1961 (Fig. 4), that functioned architecturally as a wall and in its subtle colour gradations, communicated in the language of the loom. Woven in collaboration with the weavers on the Île aux Coudres, the work measured 215 × 540 cm, its extended horizontal format was animated by softly integrated vertical bars of colour that eschewed the geometric precision of earlier more “Plasticien” works. In *Hiver canadien*, deep blues, blacks, and greens anchor the viewer in the shadowy light of dawn that gradually brightens to clear blues, mauve-blues, and then darkens to greens and the sombre hues of night. Played out in wool, *Hiver canadien* offered warmth and light, creating a visual impact that could not have been achieved in any other medium.

Response in the Francophone Quebec press was enthusiastic and acknowledged Rousseau-Vermette’s ambition to create tapestries that would bring warmth and gaiety to contemporary architecture. Reviewing the exhibition for *Le Nouveau Journal*, Jean Sarrazin noted that Rousseau-



4 | Mariette Rousseau-Vermette, *Hiver canadien*, 1961, wool tapestry, 213.3 × 540.7 cm, Collection Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec. (Photo: Jean-Guy Kérourac)



Vermette's tapestries were technical "tours de force" with their subtle colour transitions and delicate nuances. In *Printemps*, 1961 (Fig. 5), the artist explored colour variations within a single hue, presenting a series of understated vertical modulations from cool to warm and focusing on a series of yellow-greens, yellow-golds and clear yellows that recalled the colour studies of Josef Albers's *Homage to the Square* series begun in 1950. Sarrazin also praised Rousseau-Vermette's use of variously textured wools: thick, frothy and even "furry," that would confer the expected feelings of warmth and comfort to architectural spaces, but more importantly, on an emotional level, provide a visual and spiritual refuge.⁵⁸ In an article by Marie Laurier in *La Presse*, Rousseau-Vermette stated that her goal was to create a personal style, not one based on [European] French precedents, but, through her use of local wools and colours inspired by the environs of the Laurentians, one that was truly Canadian.⁵⁹

In 1962, only two Canadians were included in the first Biennale Internationale de la Tapisserie in Lausanne, Switzerland: Rousseau-Vermette



5 | Mariette Rousseau-Vermette, *Printemps*, 1961, wool tapestry, 210 × 257 cm, Collection Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec. (Photo: Jean-Guy Kérouac)

and Krystyna Sadowska (1912–1994), who immigrated to Canada from Poland in the 1950s. Co-founded by the collector Pierre Pauli and artist Jean Lurçat, the biennale’s inaugural catalogue featured statements by architects Le Corbusier and Richard Neutra who both embraced “the new tapestry.” Le Corbusier extolled its virtues as a ‘muralnomad’, capable of being rolled and moved as owners changed homes, and Neutra praised the discipline of weaving, recognizing in tapestry a welcome counterpoint to the cool austerity of modern architecture.⁶⁰ In contrast to Sadowska’s figurative work, Rousseau-Vermette exhibited her large abstraction, *Hiver canadien*. In a review of the exhibition, the writer in *L’Écho de Bas St. Laurent* praised Rousseau-Vermette’s successful adaptation of the ancient art of tapestry to contemporary tastes, and importantly, noted that nature was her source of inspiration and that her

intense colour and harmonious lines successfully captured the beauty of “our Québécois landscape.”⁶¹

Between 1962 and 1963, Rousseau-Vermette began to design new compositions with stronger colours, simplified contrasts, and more obvious geometric form. In *Ablaze*, ca. 1963 (Fig. 6), two bold vertical columns of red are interrupted by a crenellated pattern whose angular definition diminishes in proportion from left to right. In contrast to its theatricality, other works of these years demonstrate the use of more delicate, subdued palettes and evoke the reflections of lakes, falling snow, and setting suns.

Ever committed to researching global weaving traditions, Rousseau-Vermette travelled to Japan in the spring of 1964, to visit weaving studios and to learn Japanese approaches to materials and techniques. In May of the same year, Galerie Camille Hébert in Montreal presented eleven of Rousseau-Vermette’s newest tapestries. Critics raved about the exhibition agreeing that the tapestries were “real works of art” and the products of an immense talent. An unnamed critic in *La Presse* praised the works, both those with subtle colour contrasts and those with strong geometric designs, for their great refinement and sumptuous beauty.

The forms are important, but the wool is there to tone down the impression of massiveness or harshness. In all of the tapestries, the wool conveys an element of softness, especially when it is brushed and almost resembles felt. The violence of the contrasts is quieted, and the brushed wools create effects of light and reflections . . . altogether the exhibition conveys an impression of intimacy, warmth and sensuality, of rest and equilibrium born from the rigour of the compositions.⁶²

The mid-1960s were a whirlwind of activity for Rousseau-Vermette who received several prestigious commissions as well as invitations to participate in national and international exhibitions. In 1965 alone, she produced twenty-three tapestries and was included in the National Gallery of Canada travelling exhibition, *Montreal Artists*, curated by Guy Robert (1933–), then director of the newly formed Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal. Rousseau-Vermette was dubbed a “muralist” and her work grouped with that of Micheline Beauchemin and the ceramist Jordi Bonet (1932–1979); Robert signaled his appreciation of the vision of these artists who brought large-scale works of art to contemporary architecture.⁶³

In 1965, invited to participate in the second International Biennial of Tapestry in Lausanne, Switzerland, Rousseau-Vermette created *Contrastes*, 1965. This large work (215 × 540 cm) is animated by brown and gold crenellations juxtaposed against vertical stripes of colour that fade and



6 | Mariette Rousseau-Vermette, *Ablaze*, ca. 1963, wool tapestry, 210.8 × 172.7 cm, Collection National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. (Photo: National Gallery of Canada)



7 | Mariette Rousseau-Vermette, *Mortaises rouge dans le noir*, 1966-1971, wool tapestry, approx. 10 × 12 metres, Collection Eisenhower Theatre, John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, D.C. (Photo: Estate of Mariette Rousseau-Vermette)

intensify in alternating columns; it affirmed her desire to “transmit to city and public buildings the feeling of fulfillment contained in the calm and beauty of nature.”⁶⁴ Exhibited at Place des Arts in Montreal during Expo 67, this work was later purchased by the Federal Department of the Environment for their new building Édifice Fontaine, in Hull (now Gatineau), Quebec.

That same year, the new Canadian Centre for the Performing Arts in Ottawa (later re-named the National Arts Centre), commissioned Rousseau-Vermette to weave a curtain for The Theatre. Micheline Beauchemin received the commission for the Opera (Southam Hall) curtain. Rousseau-Vermette’s commission was one of her largest to date and measured 427 square metres. The work was composed of vertical masses of blue, purple, rose, and green, and designed to accommodate the parallel folds of a curtain.⁶⁵

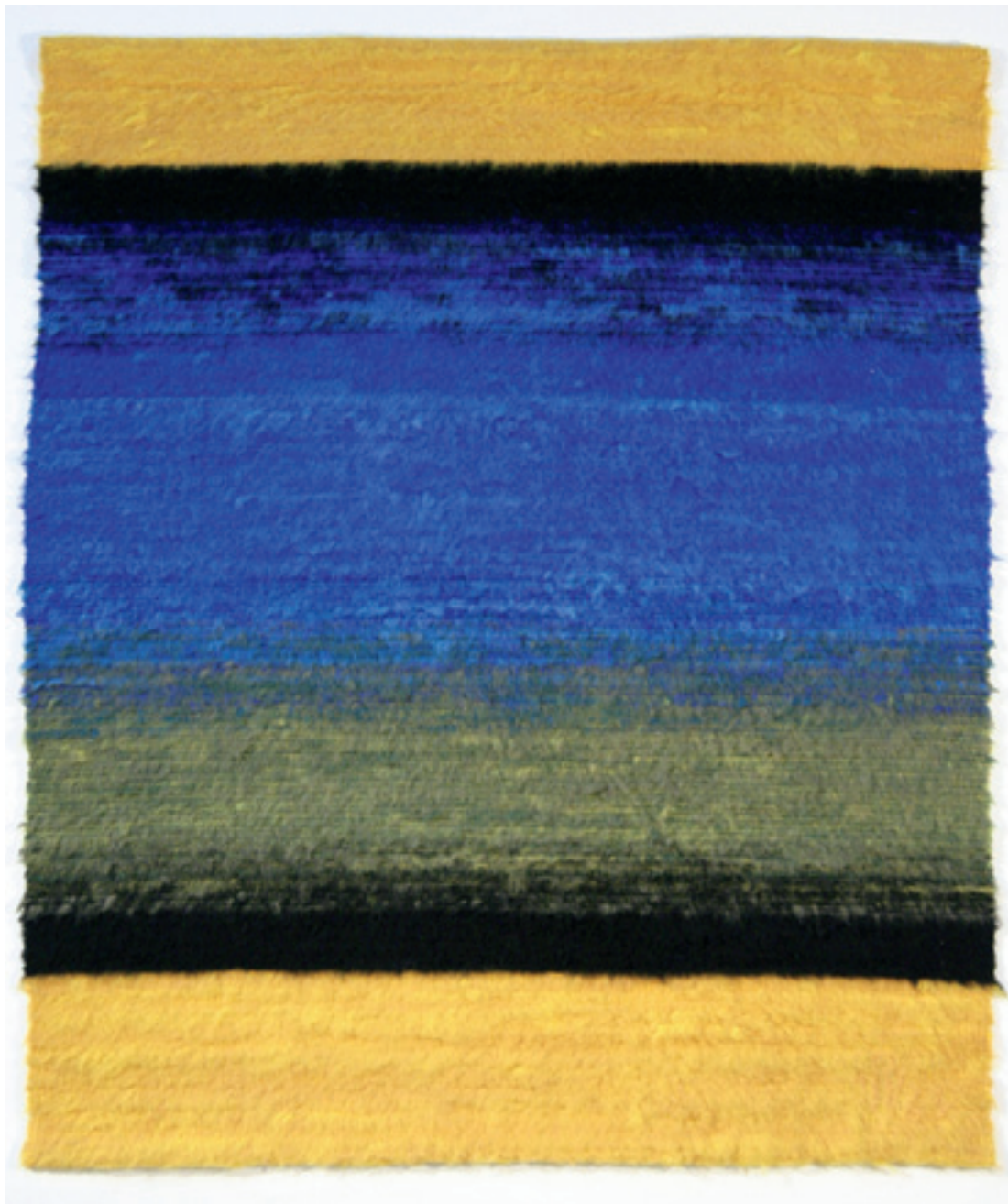
Under Rousseau-Vermette's careful and frequent supervision, the curtain was produced with the assistance of the commercial weavers Cleyn and Tinker Ltd, in Huntingdon, Quebec, and completed in 1968 in good time for the opening of the National Arts Centre in September 1969.⁶⁶ Interviewed following its unveiling, the artist declared that the colours were "what I felt were needed for a calm and warm theatre."⁶⁷

Rousseau-Vermette further secured her international reputation with *Mortaises rouges dans le noir*, 1966–1971 (Fig. 7). The curtain commissioned for the Eisenhower Theatre, John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., was presented as a gift and a tribute to the late president by the Canadian government. Interviewed in 1970, shortly before its completion, Rousseau-Vermette stated that the tapestry was more than a stage curtain, but rather an integral part of the architecture, created in collaboration with the Kennedy's Center's architect Edward Durrell Stone.⁶⁸ With its bold red and black crenellated pattern meeting in the centre of the design, Rousseau-Vermette sought to express "the unity of all nations in friendship and in progress."⁶⁹

In Europe, Rousseau-Vermette's work *Éclats de Braise*, 1966, was included in the Third International Biennial of Tapestry in Lausanne, held in 1967. Appreciated as the "doyenne des peintres-liciers du Québec" by Colette Duhaime in *La Patrie*, the critic praised Rousseau-Vermette's fidelity to the rigours of traditional low-warp weaving techniques, and her skill in imbuing them with a contemporary style, modern and abstract.⁷⁰

Expo 67, the Montreal World's Fair and celebration of Canada's centenary, put Canadian artists and architects on the world stage at home, and provided numerous commissions and exhibition opportunities for Rousseau-Vermette. In addition to *Carte du Monde*, 1967, a tapestry commissioned by The Jeunesses Musicales for the Canadian Music Pavilion, she also produced *Fleurs dans la Toundra*, 1967, for the Quebec Pavilion, and a tapestry for an apartment in architect Moshe Safdie's (1938–) housing complex *Habitat 67*. At the Canadian Fine Craft Exhibition organized by Montcrieff Williamson, she exhibited *Brasier* (1963), and *Aube ou Nuit*, 1965 (Fig. 8). In this last work, broad horizontal bands of yellow, at the top and bottom, frame a bright blue centre area that darkens as it meets the yellow. In contrast to previous works with more assertive geometric patterns, the softness of the brushed wool and repeated horizontality of the coloured bands evoke the introspective compositions of Rothko and achieve a similar air of serenity and contemplation. The beauty and high quality of Rousseau-Vermette's work attracted praise from André Malraux, France's minister of cultural affairs.⁷¹

Following the successes of 1967, Rousseau-Vermette continued to seek opportunities to work with architects on new building projects in which she



8 | Mariette Rousseau-Vermette, *Aube ou nuit*, 1965, wool tapestry, 166 × 143 cm, Collection Confederation Centre for the Arts, Charlottetown. (Photo: Confederation Centre for the Arts, Charlottetown)

was involved at the conceptual stage. In 1968, she embarked on the first of many projects with Vancouver architect Arthur Erickson (1924–2009) who selected her to create a pair of tapestries for the MacMillan Bloedel Building in Vancouver. Entitled *Sous-bois au printemps*, the tapestries designed with complementary palettes, were each composed of three vertical columns of colour; one in a palette of moss greens, earth brown, and yellows, and the other, in shades of blues, greens and yellows. Installed on the concrete walls of a main floor corridor, they evoked the dappled light of the forest in springtime, and with their striking verticality, each approximately four metres high, echoed the soaring concrete grid of the building's exterior.

By the close of the 1960s, Rousseau-Vermette's status as one of Canada's leading modernist textile artists was firmly established. In addition to the scores of prestigious commissions that would continue to come her way in future decades, her status as an artist and a painter-weaver would be sustained nationally and internationally by solo and group exhibitions. When her work was included in the exhibition *Art for Architecture – The Wall*, organized by Anita Aarons for the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1969, along with painters, sculptors and other textile artists such as Joyce Wieland (1931–1998), Micheline Beauchemin, and Charlotte Lindgren, Rousseau-Vermette reaffirmed her vision, "I hope that my tapestries satisfy my desire to contribute to the architecture of today."⁷²

Mariette Rousseau-Vermette's contributions to modernist textiles extended beyond her own magnificent work. In her trajectory as a successful modernist painter-weaver with an expanding national and international reputation, Rousseau-Vermette was instrumental in transforming the art of weaving in Quebec. Practiced as artisanal women's work in the 1930s and 1940s, and often overlooked by museums and art institutions, weaving became one of the most successful contemporary art forms to be integrated with modern architecture. The recognition brought by her inclusion in the three international biennales of tapestry held in Lausanne, Switzerland in the 1960s, coupled with her enormous output of high-quality work that was appreciated by critics, curators, and architects around the globe, affirmed her status as a leading painter-weaver, a professional artist whose aesthetic vision and expert knowledge of the art and craft of weaving earned her high esteem as a model and inspiration for artist-weavers working in Canada today.

- 1 In the 1960s, authors such as the following explored the concept of painter-weaver: “Artiste-tapisser” in Guy ROBERT, “Syphonies en laine et couleurs,” *Vie des Arts* 36 (1964): 18–24; Dorthy BARNHOUSE, “Gallery featuring Painter in Wool,” *Edmonton Journal*, 14 Mar. 1966; “Doyenne des peintres-liciers,” *La Patrie* (Montreal), 10 June 1967. Even today, the term, with the variation of “artist,” rather than “painter” persists; for example, contemporary Quebec artist-weaver Marcel Marois who admired Rousseau-Vermette, refers to himself as an “artiste-licier.”
- 2 Virginia GARDNER TROY, *The Modernist Textile: Europe and America 1890–1940* (Aldershot, UK: Lund Humphries, 2006), 14.
- 3 Françoise CLOUTIER-COURNOYER, *Quebec Tapestries* (Montreal: Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal, 1979), 5.
- 4 Mildred CONSTANTINE and Jack LENOR LARSEN, *Beyond Craft: The Art Fabric* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1972).
- 5 GARDNER TROY, *The Modernist Textile*, 13.
- 6 Sandra ALFOLDY, “Canada’s Textile Pioneers,” in *Crafting New Traditions – Canadian Innovators and Influences*, ed. Alan C. Elder (Gatineau, QC: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2008), 81.
- 7 National Gallery of Canada, “Mariette Rousseau-Vermette artist’s statement,” *Beauchemin/Vermette – Canadian Artists Series III* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1960).
- 8 Ellen EASTON MCLEOD, *In Good Hands: The Women of the Canadian Handicrafts Guild* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1999), 242–65.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 242.
- 10 Oscar BÉRIAU, “The Handicraft Renaissance in Quebec,” *Canadian Geographic Journal* 3 (1933): 148–49.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 Suzanne and Laurent LAMY, *La Renaissance des métiers d’art au Canada français* (Quebec: Ministère des Affaires culturelles, 1967), 11–29.
- 13 Luce Vermette (the sister of Claude Vermette), interview with the author, Gatineau, QC, 24 Feb. 2010. General biographical information about the artist is drawn from this source.
- 14 I thank Dr. Sandra Alföldy for sharing the contents of her interview with Mariette Rousseau-Vermette, Saint-Adèle, QC, 29 Apr. 2005.
- 15 “L’école d’artisanat de Pointe au Pic,” *Le Confident* (Quebec), 6 Apr. 1966.
- 16 Oscar BÉRIAU, “Craft Revival in Quebec,” *Craft Horizons* 2, no. 1 (1942): 26.
- 17 ALFOLDY, “Canada’s Textile Pioneers,” 79.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 Gloria LESSER, *École du Meuble 1930–1950: Interior Design and Decorative Art in Montreal* (Montreal: Le Château Dufresne, Montreal Museum of Decorative Arts, 1984), 65.
- 20 Ann DAVIS, *Frontiers of Our Dreams: Quebec Painting in the 1940s and 1950s* (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1979), 11.
- 21 Michele BERNATCHEZ and Ginette HARVEY PERRIER, *La Tapisserie* (Montreal: La Documentation québécoise, 1977), 8.
- 22 Luce Vermette, interview with the author, Gatineau, QC, 24 Feb. 2010.

- 23 Future research may uncover information about the visual sources that Dallaire would have used to introduce his students to Lurçat's work. He may have had photographs of Lurçat's designs or of the tapestries woven from same, or he may have invited them to look at his own work, where he emulated the effects of woven works in paint.
- 24 Mariette Rousseau-Vermette, hand-written notes for a talk delivered at the Musée du Québec, 23 October 1992. The Estate of Mariette Rousseau-Vermette.
- 25 Didier PRIOUL, *Dallaire* (Quebec: Musée du Québec, 1999), 136, fn. 27.
- 26 Terry KIRKMAN, "Weaving warmth into buildings," *The Montreal Star*, 26 Dec. 1970.
- 27 "Top Weaver," *Life* magazine, 24 Nov. 1947 (vol. 23, no. 9): 93–95.
- 28 Cyril SIMARD, *Artisanat Québécois* (Montreal: Les Éditions de l'homme, 1975), 420.
- 29 Sandra Alföldy, interview with Mariette Rousseau-Vermette, 29 Apr. 2005.
- 30 Alexandra WINTON, "Colour and Personality: Dorothy Liebes and American Design," *Archives of American Art Journal* 48:1–2 (2009): 4–17.
- 31 Ibid, 17.
- 32 Sandra Alföldy, interview with Mariette Rousseau-Vermette, 29 Apr. 2005.
- 33 GARDNER TROY, *The Modernist Textile*, 116.
- 34 Gene BARO, *Anni Albers* (New York: The Brooklyn Museum, 1977), 8.
- 35 Hélène OUVARD, *Wall Tapestries: Mariette Rousseau-Vermette* (Montreal: Éditions Formart, 1974), non-paginated.
- 36 Luce Vermette, interview with the author, 24 Feb. 2010.
- 37 Rose-Marie ARBOUR, "L'apport des femmes peintres au courant post-automatiste : une représentation critique (1955–1965)," in *Les Arts et les années soixante : architecture, arts visuels, chanson, cinéma, design, littérature, musique, théâtre*, ed. Francine Couture (Montreal: Tryptique, 1991), 25–35.
- 38 Artist's statement, *Beauchemin/Vermette*.
- 39 "Hommage à nos courtiers canadiens," *La Presse* (Montreal), 15 Nov. 1958.
- 40 KIRKMAN, "Weaving warmth into buildings."
- 41 DAVIS, *Frontiers of Our Dreams*, 35.
- 42 Suzanne and Laurent LAMY, *La Renaissance des métiers d'art au Canada français*, 26.
- 43 GARDNER TROY, *The Modernist Textile*, 16.
- 44 Letter dated 8 July 1959 to Rousseau-Vermette from Richard B. Simmins, Director, Exhibition Extension Services, National Gallery of Canada. Archival file: Exhibitions in Canada, Canadian Artists Series III, Box 12-4-75, National Gallery of Canada Archives.
- 45 Undated National Gallery of Canada press release, "Canadian Artists Series III," Archival file in *ibid*.
- 46 Installation photographs of Canadian Artists III exhibition taken at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston, Ontario, 2–21 June 1960. Archival file in *ibid*.
- 47 Rousseau-Vermette had submitted ten works but actually toured nine works; one of the tapestries after a cartoon by Mousseau was withdrawn at the last moment. Supplying record – outward #473, 15 January 1960 indicates a tapestry after a cartoon by Jean-Paul Mousseau was returned to Rousseau-Vermette. Archival file in *ibid*.
- 48 Artist's statement, *Beauchemin/Vermette*.
- 49 "Exposition de tapisseries de Mariette Rousseau-Vermette," *L'Écho de Bas St. Laurent*, Rimouski, QC, 22 Nov. 1961.

- 50 Sandra ALFOLDY, *Art Textiles of the World* (Brighton, UK: Telos Art Publishing, 2009), 12.
- 51 Leon WHITESON, *Modern Canadian Architecture* (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers Ltd., 1983), 9–14.
- 52 Francine COUTURE, ed., *Les Arts et les années soixante : architecture, arts visuels, chanson, cinéma, design, littérature, musique, théâtre* (Montreal: Tryptique, 1991), 10–14.
- 53 This is amply supported by clippings and correspondence located in the artist's files in the Archives of the National Gallery of Canada, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, the Vancouver Art Gallery, and the artist's own personal papers.
- 54 Sandra ALFOLDY, *Crafting Identity: The Development of Professional Fine Craft in Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 31.
- 55 Ibid., 32.
- 56 Sandra ALFOLDY, "Excellence, Inventiveness and Variety: *Canadian Fine Crafts* at Expo 67" in *Made in Canada: Craft and Design in the Sixties*, ed. Alan Elder (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 53–56.
- 57 Gallery XII Exhibitions file, 1961, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts Archives.
- 58 Jean SARRAZIN, "Rousseau-Vermette : recherche d'une tapisserie canadienne," *Le Nouveau Journal* (Montreal), 26 Nov. 1961.
- 59 Marie LAURIER, "Tapisserie sur laine," *La Presse*, 20 Nov. 1961.
- 60 *1ère Biennale internationale de la tapisserie* (Lausanne: Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts, 1962).
- 61 *L'Écho de Bas St. Laurent*, Rimouski, 3 Oct. 1962.
- 62 "Mariette Rousseau-Vermette," *La Presse*, 23 May 1964. Author's translation.
- 63 Guy ROBERT, "Introduction," *Montreal Artists* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1965).
- 64 Jean JOHNSON, *Three Canadian Fibre Artists: Gregor, Rousseau-Vermette, Staniszki* (Windsor: Art Gallery of Windsor, 1981), 5.
- 65 "Arts Centre Curtain Six Month Job," *The Ottawa Citizen*, 1 Mar. 1966.
- 66 Competition for Hall and Theatre Curtains, 7 Apr. 1965 – 20 Dec. 1967, National Arts Centre file 4-2-4-4, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.
- 67 Shiela MCCOOK, "Curtain up . . . and it took the designer five years to do it," *The Ottawa Citizen*, 1 Oct. 1969.
- 68 KIRKMAN, "Weaving warmth into buildings."
- 69 ALFOLDY, *Crafting Identity*, 92.
- 70 Colette DUHAIME, "Mariette Rousseau-Vermette," *La Patrie*, 10 June 1967.
- 71 ALFOLDY, *Made in Canada*, 56.
- 72 Anita AARONS, *Art for Architecture – The Wall* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1969).

Mariette Rousseau-Vermette : Le cheminement d'un peintre-lissier, des années quarante aux années soixante

ANNE NEWLANDS

Lorsque Mariette Rousseau-Vermette (1926–2006), artiste québécoise de renommée mondiale, s'est éteinte en 2006, à l'âge de 79 ans, elle laissait derrière elle un riche héritage de plus de 640 tapisseries, dont plusieurs commandes prestigieuses, entre autres du Centre national des arts du Canada, Ottawa (1968); du Eisenhower Theatre, du John F. Kennedy Centre for the Performing Arts, Washington, D.C. (1971); du Roy Thomson Hall, Toronto (1981); et du siège social de l'Imperial Tobacco, Montréal (2002). Rousseau-Vermette a eu de nombreuses expositions au cours de sa carrière. Elle a reçu prix et honneurs, y compris l'Ordre du Canada (1976). Ses œuvres se retrouvent dans des collections publiques au Canada et dans d'autres pays. Malgré cette reconnaissance, on a peu écrit sur ses débuts comme artiste, sur le développement de son identité de peintre-lissier et sur ses premiers succès comme artiste moderniste.

Le présent article explore le développement de la carrière de Rousseau-Vermette comme peintre-lissier depuis les années quarante jusqu'aux années soixante. Il étudie ses rapports avec l'art et le métier de la tapisserie au Québec dans les années trente et quarante, sa formation artistique et ses influences, le milieu de l'art au Québec dans les années cinquante et soixante, tel que défini par l'esthétique de l'abstraction géométrique des plasticiens de Montréal, et la réception de son œuvre par la critique dans les années soixante. L'article soutient la thèse que le succès de Rousseau-Vermette en tant qu'artiste moderniste s'enracine dans son adhésion à l'abstraction géométrique comme vocabulaire visuel primaire et son approche à la tapisserie fondée sur la vision moderniste de l'authenticité des matériaux et le rejet de l'ornementation superflue, ainsi que sa collaboration avec des architectes qui recherchaient ses tapisseries, puissantes et méticuleusement tissées, comme complément à la stricte austérité de l'architecture moderne.

Au début du xx^e siècle, la Canadian Handicraft Guild et certaines personnes, comme l'anthropologue Marius Barbeau (1883–1969), cherchent à faire revivre les métiers d'art et du textile traditionnels du Québec. En 1930, le gouvernement du Québec fonde un département des métiers d'art et crée

l'École provinciale des arts domestiques afin d'enseigner aux femmes à filer, à tisser et à crocheter des tapis, et assurer la production de tissus fait main pour le marché domestique et la préservation des anciennes traditions face aux produits fabriqués en usine. En 1926, année de la naissance de Mariette Rousseau, à Trois-Pistoles, Québec, le tissage à la main est répandu aussi bien comme passe-temps que par nécessité. Rousseau avait douze ans quand elle reçut son premier métier à tisser.

La fin des années trente et le début des années quarante ont été un temps propice pour l'art moderniste au Québec. La fondation de la Société d'art contemporain, en 1939, le retour de Paris d'Alfred Pellan (1906–1988), en 1940, et l'exposition des gouaches abstraites surréalistes de Paul-Émile Borduas (1905–1960), en 1942, ouvrent des portes aux jeunes artistes désireux de s'affranchir des traditions conservatrices. Le pont entre l'art moderniste et les arts textiles s'est construit lentement : en 1941, Thérèse Lafrance réalise un tapis croché d'après une œuvre de Pellan, *Le Jongleur*, et, au début des années cinquante, Gaby Pinsonneault exécute des tapis d'après les dessins abstraits de Fernand Leduc (1916–) et de Louis Belzile (1929–). Mariette Rousseau-Vermette est cependant l'une des premières à *tisser* les dessins d'artistes abstraits.

De 1944 à 1948, Rousseau étudie la peinture, le dessin et le tissage à l'École des Beaux-Arts de Québec, où Jean Dallaire (1916–1965) a laissé un souvenir mémorable en tant que professeur. L'enthousiasme de Dallaire pour les peintures et tapisseries de l'artiste français Jean Lurçat, le père de « la nouvelle tapisserie », devait certainement toucher une corde sensible chez Rousseau. En 1948, à la fin de ses études, elle se rend à San Francisco étudier auprès de Dorothy Liebes (1899–1972), créatrice textile renommée et innovatrice qui tissait pour les décorateurs et les architectes. Rousseau suit aussi les cours du California College of Arts and Crafts, à Oakland. Durant cette période, elle pourrait aussi avoir connu l'œuvre d'Anni Albers, influente artiste lissière et designer textile allemande qui, avec d'autres artistes allemands, avait importé aux États-Unis l'art et les idées du Bauhaus ainsi qu'une manière moderniste d'utiliser les textiles.

Rousseau revient au Canada en 1949 et s'installe à Montréal, où elle travaille pour une fabrique de textile avec des architectes d'intérieur et où elle tisse des tissus exclusifs pour des stylistes de mode et des décorateurs. Ses liens d'amitié avec l'artiste montréalais Claude Vermette (1930–2006), dont elle admirait les peintures abstraites aux vives couleurs et les céramiques aux formes audacieuses, la conduit à une rencontre avec les jeunes artistes associés à Paul-Émile Borduas et aux automatistes. Les peintres Fernand Leduc et Jean-Paul Mousseau (1927–1991) allaient, plus tard, lui fournir des dessins pour ses tapisseries.

En 1952, après des voyages en Europe pour voir des œuvres d'art et étudier les techniques de la tapisserie, Rousseau et Vermette se marient et s'installent à Sainte-Adèle, au nord de Montréal. En 1956, Rousseau-Vermette tisse *Rencontre totémique à Chilkat*, d'après un carton abstrait de Fernand Leduc. Cette œuvre a remporté le premier prix dans la section des arts décoratifs des concours artistiques annuels de la province de Québec, en 1957. En 1959, Rousseau-Vermette et Micheline Beauchemin (1929–2009) sont invitées par le Musée des beaux-arts du Canada à participer à une exposition itinérante. En plus des tapisseries aux structures d'une composition précise, avec des bandes de couleur isolées et des formes géométriques, d'après des cartons de Mousseau, Guido Molinari (1933–2004), Louis Belzile, Jean Goguen (1927–1989) et Claude Vermette, elle expose aussi des œuvres qu'elle a elle-même dessinées. À partir de ce moment-là, elle est la seule dessinatrice de toutes ses tapisseries.

Entre 1961 et 1969, Rousseau-Vermette produit environ 220 tapisseries, depuis des petits formats d'un mètre carré jusqu'à d'énormes rideaux de scène fabriqués avec l'aide d'autres tisserands et établissements commerciaux. Les titres des œuvres font largement allusion aux saisons, à son environnement naturel et aux harmonies de couleurs ainsi qu'à son engagement envers un langage visuel abstrait. L'usage qu'elle fait d'un langage géométrique abstrait dans la création de ses tapisseries, les faisait apprécier par les architectes modernistes qui montraient la même sobre esthétique visuelle dans leurs grandes structures angulaires de verre, d'acier et de béton. De plus, la haute qualité technique de son travail, son habileté éprouvée à produire des tapisseries de très grand format, comme *Hiver canadien* (Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec), dès 1961, et la reconnaissance internationale que lui a valu sa participation à la première Biennale Internationale de la Tapisserie de Lausanne, Suisse, et à celles qui ont suivi, ont aussi contribué à sa visibilité et à son succès.

En 1965, le Centre national des arts du Canada, à Ottawa, lui commande un rideau de scène. Pour Expo 67, Rousseau-Vermette produit *Carte du Monde*, pour le pavillon des Jeunesses musicales du Canada, *Flours dans la Toundra*, pour le pavillon du Québec, une tapisserie pour un des appartements d'Habitat 67 par l'architecte Moshe Safdie (1938–) et, dans le cadre de l'exposition sur l'artisanat canadien, elle expose des œuvres dont les larges bandes horizontales de couleur témoignent de son admiration pour l'œuvre du peintre américain Mark Rothko. En 1968, elle s'engage dans le premier de plusieurs projets avec l'architecte vancouverois Arthur Erickson (1924–2009), qui l'avait choisie pour créer une tapisserie pour l'édifice MacMillan Bloedel de Vancouver.

À la fin des années soixante, la réputation de Rousseau-Vermette comme l'un des leaders au Canada parmi les créateurs textiles modernistes était solidement établie. En plus des dizaines de commissions prestigieuses et de collaborations avec des architectes qu'elle ne cessait de recevoir, sa réputation en tant qu'artiste-lissier allait se maintenir grâce à des expositions solo ou en groupe sur la scène nationale et internationale.

Traduction : Élise Bonnette