Introduction

When Nancy Hemenway studied painting and drawing at the Art Students League in New York from 1961 to 1964 with men such as Thomas Fogarty, Robert Brackman and Joseph Hirsch, she was far removed from the fiber medium which would almost exclusively occupy her creative life from 1966 to the present.

Nancy Hemenway was born in 1920 at Boothbay Harbor, Maine. Her winters were spent on a farm at Foxboro, Massachusetts, and her summers at Boothbay Harbor. She was the daughter of Robinson Sawyer Whitten, a designer and architect, and Marion Frances (Dix) Whitten, a watercolorist. Although her earliest interest in the arts, during high school days, dealt with music, she learned sewing from her grandmother at the age of six. This knowledge would stand her in good stead close to forty years later. In 1937 Nancy Hemenway entered Wheaton College, Norton, Massachusetts, as a scholarship student. She graduated with a bachelor's degree in 1941 and went on to enroll at the Graduate School of Music, Harvard University, where she studied composition with flutist Walter Piston. In 1942 she left Harvard to marry Robert D. Barton. Due to the war, their early married years were spent in many different places throughout the United States.

After the war Barton decided on a foreign service career. His first appointment took them to Montevideo, Uruguay, where they lived from 1946 to 1948. From there the Bartons moved to Rosario, Argentina. In 1953 the family moved to Spain and lived in Madrid until 1957.

Much of Nancy Hemenway's day went into the raising of a family, with limited time reserved for herself. In Montevideo she taught Art at the United States Cultural Center and also designed interior accessories. Later, when assigned to Madrid, she continued her education and received a special certificate in language, art, and literature of Spain from the University of Madrid in 1956. She studied drawing with Pierre Mathieu, worked seriously with watercolors, and began to do portraits of embassy children in this medium.

In 1957 the Bartons returned to the United States and settled in Bronxville, New York. Nancy Hemenway studied painting with Donald Pierce of the Pierce-Taubes School of New York. In 1961 she enrolled at the Art Students League in New York. There, she studied with Fogarty, Brackman, and Hirsch. In the fall of 1961 she entered the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Columbia University, where she completed a master of arts degree in Spanish lyric poetry in 1966. At the same time, she studied painting with John Heliker. She continued to do portraits, considered briefly a career with Portraits, Inc. in New York, but instead moved to Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, when her husband received an assignment there.

In 1966 the Bartons were transferred to La Paz, Bolivia, where they remained until 1968. It was this appointment that would have far-reaching impact on Nancy Hemenway's artistic career. Unable to increase the limited, allotted airplane luggage weight, Nancy Hemenway had to find substitution for easel,

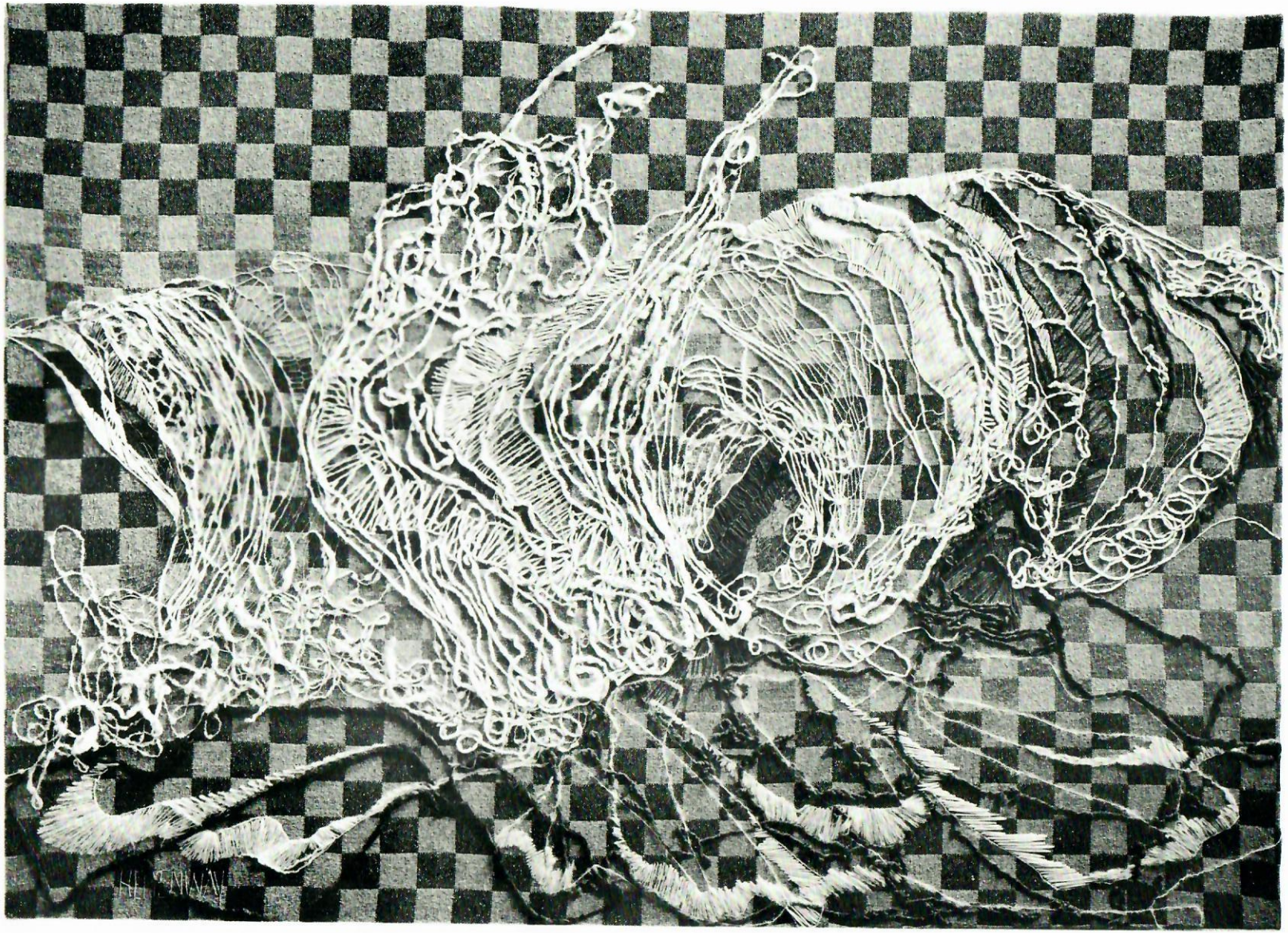
Facing page: Detail from *Surge II* (cat. no. 5)

canvases, and paints. She selected needles, bits of fabrics, threads, and yarns to help her occupy the first few weeks. Her endeavors were not at all to be looked upon as a serious artistic pursuit, but simply to give her something to do until the paints would arrive. When the easel, canvases, and paints finally reached La Paz, it was too late. In the artistic interlude, she had begun by pasting shapes made of bright wool onto paper, emphasized with touches of black ink. With the canvases on hand, her concept changed somewhat, and she began to apply handwoven native fabrics to painted canvases. However, her preoccupation with fabric gained the upper hand, and she gave up painting entirely shortly thereafter. The fabrics were known to her as *bayeta*[1] and out of want and need of a correct, descriptive technical term, she patented in 1967 the word "Bayetage."[2] Taken apart, the noun contains two crucial words, the Spanish *bayeta* and the French *collage*.[3] The die was cast, and her form of artistic expression became that of appliquéing fabrics through stitching on a fabric background. As in her painting, realistic subject matter was important, and recognizable shapes controlled the early pursuits of her newly found medium. This aspect of realism was further emphasized in that the early pieces introduced supplementary fabrics which carried patterns themselves; she used heavily brocaded silks that she had brought along and lace of European origin in conjunction with the locally produced handwoven fabrics of alpaca and lamb's wool.

Living in South America also meant that Nancy Hemenway became fascinated with the ancient cultures of that part of the world and their tradition in textile production. The pre-Columbian designs found in early Andean and Peruvian textiles and ceramics captivated her attention during the late 1960's and early 1970's as did concepts inherent in ancient Mexican and pre-Columbian cultures. The titles she gave to these early pieces are reminiscent of her source of inspiration: *Anthropomorphic Diety*, *Chimu Treasure II*, *Mask with Jaguars* and *Sacred Serpent*, among others. They form her first collection entitled "Ancient Images of Mexico and the Andes." Portions of this first collection were exhibited in a one-artist show at the National Gallery of Art, in La Paz, an unprecedented honor for a foreigner. A further selection of this initial collection was made by the Bolivian Government and was exhibited at the Pan American Union, Washington, D.C. in 1970-1971.

When her husband was transferred to Mexico, the Bartons lived in Guadalajara from 1968 to 1972. Nancy Hemenway founded an embroidery school in San Esteban Martir, near Guadalajara, for young girls. Initially, the school produced household items, such as pillow covers and small hangings, based on Hemenway designs. These were sold in department and specialty shops throughout the United States and Mexico.

Major changes occurred in Nancy Hemenway's style when she returned to the United States in 1972. It almost seems as if the ancient imagery was left and remained in South America. For a brief period her study included the arts of Alaska and the American Southwest. Yet, change was imminent after her life in the States was reestablished. Her summers were spent in Maine, her winters in Washington, D.C. Her source of inspiration became nature in its marvelous, multifaceted ways. She describes this change as a return to her native environment of sea and forest, seeing the natural world with a new sense of wonder and more detailed comprehension. She began to simplify her style, eliminated all color, unless needed for accents or in background fabrics, and began to work within a vocabulary of shapes and forms identifiable through nature. Personages and distinct man-made shapes disappeared. Although she became known with her first collection, "Ancient Images of Mexico and the Andes,"[4] representing the years 1966-1972, during this time in the United States, Hemenway's style was in process of changing completely. Her following collection, which became known as "Textures of Our Earth,"[5] introduced concepts of realism depicting trees, sea shells, flowers such as dandelions and goldenrod, birds nests, stone, and waves. Parallels with the earlier series can be drawn only



Surge I (cat. no. 2)

in most general aspects. She dealt with shapes of fabric that were rectangular or square. She applied secondary fabrics to this all fabric background, but her fabrics were no longer heavily patterned nor brocaded. If patterns occurred, they were to be found in the background fabric and were confined to a simple checkerboard pattern as with *Surge* or *Spruce Fall.* Through skillful needlework application she developed a technique far beyond simply securing a secondary fabric to a background. She drew, edged in lines of tremendous fluidity surface images that were held in place through finely spun yarns of mohair, alpaca, lamb's wool, and karakul.

Within five years time further changes and development followed. By 1976-1977 the signs were clearly recognizable in *Mangrove* and in *Salt Veil.* The secondary fabric was gently introduced through layering, folding and tucking techniques. Her rectilinear shapes broke out of their confinements and the carefully cut secondary fabrics began to demand recognition on their own. In *Elements I* of 1978, they function as accents; in *Flow of Inner Seeing I* and *II,* they build forceful masses and are attached with selvages intact; with *Basalt* and *Declivity* of 1980, *Talus* of 1981 and *Confluence I* of 1982, the fabrics themselves become the desired abstract shapes and turn three dimensional. Forms break away and out of the confining space of either a rectangle or square. Her compositions enter the surrounding space as free forms, traditional in only one respect—in being firmly supported by walls at all times, skillfully attached to hidden armatures. Only in working with transparent fabric such as cotton organdy,[6] do her works hang free, using as background either a glass wall or a window pane so that they float on rods in space and against the light. In *Variations on a Sea* and in *Variations,* this concept is introduced. Her needlework becomes entirely reversible in these creations. Aspects of needlework are being kept at a minimum; color is introduced only to highlight. In her most recent work, the full yardage complete with selvages, headings and end fringes are used; fabrics are being abutted or joined, folded, molded and tucked. Nancy Hemenway proves herself in this latest series of embroidered wall hangings as being fully in command of her medium. Two criteria are being addressed at all times—to create something beautiful and to create something better. One is tempted to ask: "Better than what?" Her concept of *better* in this context means that the work must be more original, perhaps more complex, oftentimes more spare. Better means harder, and hard at work she is at all times. Nothing is ever taken for granted. Sometimes it takes her weeks to find the right flow for her compositions, a rhythm that must come and go with ease and fluidity. She demands a sense of rhythm in all of her work as an integral part of her own basic expression.

Over the years her studies of the past have fallen into place: the ABC of needlework stitches learned at the age of six from her grandmother, further perfected in Argentina from 1949 to 1952; a splendid sense of rhythm basic to all pursuits in music and composition, an aspect of the arts that had intrigued her during her formative years in high school and college, followed during 1941-1942 when she studied with Walter Piston at Harvard; her knowledge and love for drawing, which she has described as "my language since I can remember"; the conscious and subconscious knowledge of a visual composition be it within a painting or a wall hanging by being fully cognizant as to how to work on a flat surface and how to handle mass, weight, shapes, support and details . . . lessons with Pierre Mathieu, Donald Pierce, and with her Art Students League professors well absorbed; all to be fully utilized and to be reflected in the series "Aqua Lapis: Embroidered Wall Sculptures, 1975-1983."

Added to this is her knowledge of and the actual making of ceramics. She paints with yarns and sculpts with fabric. The sculpting with fabrics gives her the option to form shadows which, in turn, result in depth and three dimensionality. She strives for monumentality without sacrificing detail. Even the knowledge

Facing page: *Rock Leichen* (cat. no. 1)

gained at Columbia University in Spanish lyric poetry has found an artistic application as Nancy Hemenway frequently perceives her ideas to be born first with a poem. Occasionally, the poem follows later, all part of her pursuit of rhythm and form. And then there are attributes such as conviction, discipline, hard work, perseverance, and the strong belief that "art is a skill" that influences every minute of her creative days.

Not to be overlooked are the fabrics and access to handwoven materials and yarns that Nancy Hemenway has had over the years. The friendships made in foreign lands during the periods as a foreign service wife or those made on trips as ambassador without portfolio[7] and recently as recipient of an NEA Fellowship have aided her there. She has travelled for the United States Department of State and the United States Information Agency to Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), Southwest Africa (Namibia), Mozambique, Zambia, Republic of South Africa, Madagascar, Swaziland, Botswana, Lesotho and Benin. Some of these places provide her with resources unavailable to many artists.

By telephone, telegram and providing specific technical descriptions in letters, her communications take place with native craftsmen who weave her expensive yardage. Months often pass between the designing and the receiving of the finished fabric. Inherent in these long distance orders are accidental changes in color in that the weaver may have run out of a specifically colored yarn. At other times, the weaver follows Hemenway's instructions to change the color of the weft while the warp remains the same throughout. (See *Aqua Lapis III).*

She has had the good fortune to work almost exclusively with natural fibers—be they mohair,[8] alpaca,[9] lamb's wool,[10] silk[11] and karakul,[12]—which she uses in their natural colors, both in the fabric and the yarn. When colors appear, she has used yarns colored by natural dyes or commercially bought Persian yarns.[13] Although she does not weave her own fabrics, she very definitely spins and oftentimes on purpose overspins her yarns. Her technique also includes uneven spinning. An overspun yarn will spring back upon itself. It will form a pattern on its own the moment it is released of its inherent tension. It is that moment that Nancy Hemenway captures. These couched yarns interconnect, outline, and embellish in most ingenious ways. It also allows her to get a fluid line, only to be found in a drawing or to be compared to an edging. She often refers to her use of line as close to that of a graphic artist. She is drawn to textiles for the duality they offer—the subtle clean line and the special quality of malleability.

When one studies her stitch vocabulary, one finds all the traditional stitches that man has used since he invented a needle. Yet, the interpretation and utilization of these stitches have undergone changes that are Nancy Hemenway's personal adaptations. Most prominent among these adaptations is the couching technique[14] which we have called "hidden couching." The yarn is simply caught from the underside so that it does not flatten the yarn and does not interfere with the fluidity of line. The satin stitch she uses gives a feeling of lightness in an otherwise dense area (See *Flow of Inner Seeing II* and *Confluence II).* Another technique is that of making her edges more prominent when she uses organdy. She runs an extra outlining yarn through the buttonhole stitches that she has fashioned with fine cotton thread. (See *Confluence II* and *Salt Veil).* This treatment also lends itself to soften the line.

The accessibility of studio space has been of concern to Nancy Hemenway all along. Her first textile studio was in the living room of her home in Washington, D.C., when she returned from Latin America in 1972 to live permanently in the United States. Later, as her hangings grew in size, she converted the top floor of another house in Washington, D.C., into a studio. During the summer months, she would work at Boothbay Harbor, in the attic of the family cottage. In 1976 she was able to rent on Mouse Island a one-room

Overleaf: *Flow of Inner Seeing—Part I*
(cat. no. 14)

cottage which had once belonged to the late Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick of Riverside Church in New York. It was on Mouse Island, half a mile by water from her cottage, that she discovered nature and its "true grandeur," as a subject for her art. It was in this little one room studio that "Textures of Our Earth" emerged as a series of hangings. A great many pieces of the present "Aqua Lapis: Embroidered Wall Sculptures, 1975-1983" were born there as well.

Studio III, which she would call "The Loft," became a reality in 1981. It would finally provide her with the space she really needed to develop her sculptural forms to the fullest. Here, her sense of a clean, uncluttered area with light and simplicity of living, inspired her "Aqua Lapis" series. None of the restraint of sloping attic roofs and narrow restricting walls, confines her work. With the advent of "The Loft," a winter studio in Washington with greater space became an urgent necessity. By a coincidence she found Studio IV in 1981 in Virginia. She named it "Winterhouse." This is the studio where *Salt Shadow*, to date her largest piece, 21 feet 4 inches in height and 18 feet 6 inches in width (650.25 cm x 563.88 cm), was completed. The access to the larger studio spaces is important to her work. *Flow of Inner Seeing I* of 1980, in size related to *Salt Shadow*, was born in the small studio spaces, resulting in a composition that is basically made of several sections subsequently joined. In *Flow of Inner Seeing II* of 1981 she begins working at "Winterhouse" and is completely free of all and any restrictions. There is an uninterrupted strength to her latest work and the larger studio spaces introduce greater simplification. Her designs have become more sweeping and movement and thrust are clearly discernible.

Nancy Hemenway's concepts of her chosen art form are independent statements, timeless and free of any given style, phase or trend. They deal generally with nature and try to catch its evanescent quality. The medium she selected is needlework, perhaps the least explored by contemporary artists and the most stigmatized among the textile arts. It is a medium that has found great popularity during the last two to three decades through the abundance of needlework kits. To transcend this stigma took courage, an aspect Nancy Hemenway may have only been subconsciously aware of as her style grew in isolation and essentially "as the result of deprivation of basic conventional art materials" during the late 1960's.

Her subject matter selection is also most private and personal. In the series presented here, she addresses the coastline of Maine, the majestic rock formation of the Pacific Coast and the fluidity of the Potomac. Her involvement with water and stone is first hand. Feeling them, touching, sketching, drawing, photographing and capturing their essence in poetry . . . these are all steps Nancy Hemenway fully and thoroughly experiences and internalizes before she tries to translate these personal interpretations into the folding, molding, layering and tucking of fabrics selected for her specific needs. Her work enlarges and captures what nature has already presented. Her studies are enlargements seen through the microscope, represented by the artist in the most beautiful way known to her. Every bit of energy and dedication has gone into her labor.

Working as her own agent and without a gallery, she has little time to advertise herself. It is refreshing to discover such an artist untouched by twentieth-century commercialism and peer pressure. As an artist, she remains concerned with a continued challenge: how to hold in time and space something as fleeting as a wave.

Christa C. Mayer Thurman, *Curator*
Department of Textiles
The Art Institute of Chicago

Facing page: Detail from *Surge II* (cat. no. 5)

NOTES

1. The Spanish word for the English noun *baize* is *bayeta*. It is a type of flannel and has a nap on one side.
2. A noun invented and copyrighted by Nancy Hemenway in 1967 to describe in very specific terms her needlework technique. It has oftentimes been used as a synonym for her pieces.
3. A French word which stands for paste. In general this noun stands for a technique used by artists in which bits of paper, fabrics or any other kind of substances are attached to a surface.
4. See listing of Exhibitions, p. 91.
5. Ibid.
6. A sheer, finely woven cotton fabric in plain weave. Switzerland is usually credited for producing very fine organdy. Hemenway purchases her organdy from Switzerland.
7. See Biographical Data, p. 25 and Bibliography, p. 92.
8. Merritt Matthews, *The Textile Fibers, Their Physical, Microscopical and Chemical Properties*, 4th ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1924), p. 209. Matthews describes mohair as a fiber which comes from the Angora goat. The fiber is long, has little or no curl and is fine in staple. Hemenway gets her mohair fabrics from Lesotho and Swaziland; her mohair yarns come also from there and from domestic United States sources.
9. A.B. Wildman, *The Microscopy of Animal Textile Fibres*, Wool Industries Research Association (Leeds, England: Lund Humphries, Bradford and London, 1954), p. 82. Wildman describes alpaca as being part of the genus llama which includes llama, alpaca and the hybrids of the guanaco and the vicuña. After two years of growth the fiber can vary in length from 8 to 16 inches (20.32 cm x 40.68 cm). Alpaca comes in natural shades varying from white and beige to black and brown. She orders her alpaca fabrics from Bolivia and the yarn from Bolivia and Peru.
10. Matthews, p. 63. According to Matthews, lamb's wool comes from the first sheering of a young lamb of about eight months old. Hemenway buys her lamb's wool as fabric and yarn from Bolivia, Mexico, South Africa, New Zealand, Scotland, Ireland, France, and the United States. Frequently, she buys a whole fleece from New Zealand. She processes the fleece herself.
11. Ibid., p. 242. According to Matthews, silk is a continuous filament produced by the silk worm. The worm spins a cocoon around itself before it changes into a puppae. One fiber can be 1200 meters in length. The diameter of the filament is about 0.018 mm. Hemenway acquires her silks from Madagascar and Japan.
12. George E. Linton, *The Modern Textile Dictionary*, 1st ed. (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, Little, Brown and Company, 1954), p. 367. Karakul wool originates from an Asiatic breed of sheep. The fiber is usually 6-10 inches (15.2 cm to 25.4 cm) long. Hemenway obtains her karakul from Southwest Africa (Namibia) and Botswana.
13. A three-ply yarn which can be used as single ply or any combinations thereof. Hemenway purchases this yarn in the United States.
14. Christa C. Mayer Thurman, *Raiment for the Lord's Service, A Thousand Years of Western Vestments*, 1st ed. (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1975), p. 357. "A technique in which threads are laid one by one onto a supporting fabric, subsequently held in place with a secondary overcast thread."