

### Artist Nancy Hemenway Barton; Known for Tapestries

By JOE HOLLEY  
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Nancy Hemenway Barton, 87, a Washington fiber artist whose highly original tapestries attracted critical acclaim, died Feb. 23 of complications from Alzheimer's disease at a Sunrise Senior Living community in the District.

An artist who transformed fabric — lamb's wool, linen, mohair, alpaca, karakul — into intimations of sweep and movement, she drew inspiration from her peripatetic existence as the wife of a diplomat posted to the Dominican Republic, Bolivia and Mexico. She also lived and worked in Washington and Maine and lectured in Africa and Europe.

"Movement," a *Christian Science Monitor* reviewer noted in 1995, "has long been the very weft of Nancy Hemenway's life."

It wasn't just movement for movement's sake. She responded to each individuated environment in which she found herself with the preternaturally sensitive eye of the artist.

In a profile for her "Textures of the Earth" catalogue (1978), Benjamin Forgey, then the art critic for the *Washington Star* (and later *The Post*), wrote: "Painstaking observation of specific visual facts; careful nurturing of authentic personal experiences; skilled translation of these visual and emotional impressions into new tactile forms — these are the essential facets of Nancy Hemenway's art-making. It is a skilled, poetic enterprise that produces the evocative resonances we can find in these unusual tapestries."

Many of her works suggest the patterns and textures of nature — a flowing stream, ruffled waves, scudding clouds, a mountain's uplift. The rugged Maine coastline, the rock formations of the Pacific Coast and the flow of the Potomac were sources of inspiration.

Her works are in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Farnsworth Art Museum in Maine and other public and private collections around the world. Under the auspices of the Bolivian government, she became the first U.S. artist to have a solo show at the Pan American Union. It became the subject of a 1970 U.S. Information Agency film.



**Nancy Hemenway Barton transformed fabric into highly original and greatly admired tapestries.**

She was born Nancy Hemenway Whitten in Boothbay Harbor, Maine, and was the valedictorian of Foxboro (Mass.) High School when she graduated in 1937.

She received a full music scholarship to Wheaton College and graduated in 1941. She studied music composition at Harvard University's music school with Walter Piston and received a master's degree in Spanish lyric poetry from Columbia University in 1966.

In 1942, she married a childhood friend, newly commissioned Marine Lt. Robert D. Barton. After World War II, he joined the Foreign Service, and Mrs. Barton accompanied him to Uruguay and Argentina and later to Spain.

"Art became again a focal point and the steadying force in my life," she wrote in her journal. "Spain was the country where art finally surfaced to demand time and space."

In Madrid, she studied drawing and watercolor portraiture, producing dozens of likenesses of em-

bassy children and the Spanish countryside.

Returning to the United States in 1957, she studied and worked at the Art Students League of New York and expanded into oils. As her children grew, so did her commitment of time and energy to art.

Living in the Dominican Republic, Bolivia and Mexico in the 1960s introduced her to new sources of inspiration and new mediums. In 1966, when her art supplies were delayed in transit to La Paz, Bolivia, she began to work, almost as an afterthought, in what would become her trademark medium.

On a trip into the high Andes, she tucked into a small bag some yarns and odd bits of material. To that she added the rough wools hand-loomed by Bolivian country people, their yarn dyed with wildflowers. She also studied pre-Columbian tapestries in museums and private collections.

With those basic elements, working with sewing needles in place of a brush, she created an original art form she called "bayetage" — a combination of vivid flower-dyed wool, bayeta and collage. The textile wall hangings began as a celebration of local culture and the pre-Columbian traditions of South American Indian cultures and grew to incorporate representations of nature in the United States, particularly Maine's rocky shores.

When Mrs. Barton and her husband returned to the United States in 1972, she had a request for him, maybe even a demand: "You've chosen the first 30 years; I'd like to choose the next."

He was agreeable. He resigned from the Foreign Service and became a main support. Mrs. Barton devoted herself to making tapestries, works that were remarkable for their design and their innovative technique.

Each tapestry took a long time, a *Post* writer observed during a 1978 visit to her third-floor Georgetown studio.

"Thirty years," Mrs. Barton said, alluding to the years of travel and experience that informed her work.

Survivors include her husband of 65 years, of the District; three sons, Bradford Barton of Darien, Conn., William Barton of Ponte Vedra, Fla., and Frederick Barton of the District; a sister; three brothers; nine grandchildren; and seven great-grandchildren.