

Olga de Amaral:
Lost Images, Inherited Landscapes

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Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

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The pre-Columbian gods smiled upon Olga de Amaral. They blessed her with many legacies. Like all well-established bureaucracies, gods' activities were departmentalized, each god placed in charge of certain activities. In her native country, Colombia, the particular god that chose de Amaral is named Nenefocoa, the god of drinking, weaving and design.

To understand de Amaral's work, it is perhaps helpful to look at the rich history of pre-Columbian art.

Eminent scholar Wendell B. Bennett, in *Ancient Arts of the Andes*, tells us that in pre-Columbian times, weaving was the highest medium of artistic expression.¹ Evidence of this richness abounds in collections around the world. The late anthropologist and scholar Junius Bird of the American Museum of Natural History made intensive studies and examinations of pre-Columbian textiles. Bird speculated that among these woven treasures were cloth pieces made of cotton, sometimes smeared with red pigment. He went on to assert that the painted textiles (as he called them) emphasized the nature of the fabric under the painting; the fabric was never totally hidden. His research showed that color came from mineral pigment or natural dyes.²

Through archeological findings, it is well-known today that the glory of gold was all-pervasive in Colombia. Its presence is seen in such pre-Columbian artifacts as hammered gold breastplates with repoussé decorations, in altar pieces for the numerous churches built during the colonial era, in the rich gold-thread embroidery that embellished the clothes of the wealthy, and in the wonderfully extravagant carved frames with heavy gold-leaf surfaces – frames often more expressive than what they framed. The aura and omnipresence of gold in the culture of the country is truly irrepensible.

The cultural significance and inspiration of the art of the past notwithstanding, de Amaral's art is not an art of retrieval. The artist is an original, extraordinarily focused on the art of weaving, and someone who thus has helped to



Olga de Amaral, 1992

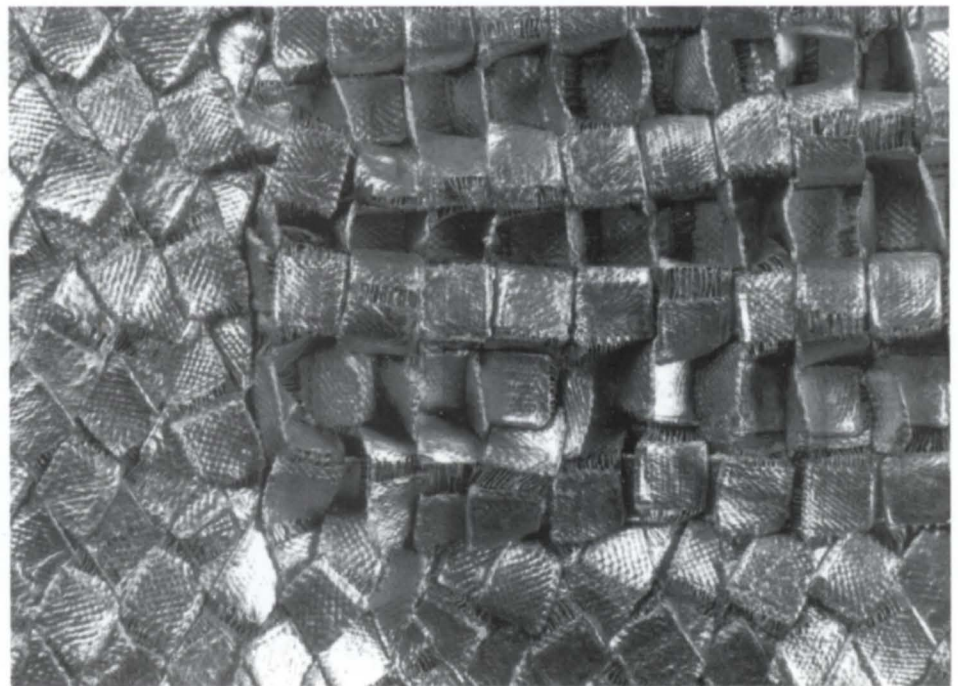
change the parameters of this art form. In the work of de Amaral, an arresting presence is before us: an interplay between constant invention and constant renewal.

Writing about de Amaral 20 years ago, Jack Lenor Larsen and I stated “the countercurrents in Olga de Amaral – passion vs. logic, sensitivity vs. organization and spontaneity vs. discipline – are in effect the exhilarating experience of

interaction of intent and result.”³ We put these all-important emotions and thoughts in an adversarial order. Today, all of this has been lost in time as we look at the present dynamic of her work. All the combinations, the complications of structure, the techniques and materials have been absorbed, digested and distilled into a new lucidity and meaning.

The important turning points in her development have been fascinating to watch: small wall-hung works of natural hand-spun wool in somber colors; monumental woven walls; the use of thick yarns, hard cords, wrapping and crossed warps; layered patterns to help produce volume and form; colors obtained by dyeing the fiber; natural materials; and industrial materials. Intention was what mattered; she kept up her pursuit of the puzzle of process. Out of all the past work from the '70s and '80s, there were persistent tracteries of thought and emotion which were substantiated by material and technique.

How she orchestrates her astonishing array of work is well-known. We know of the “backup team,” whose skilled assistance she has at her service. Whether she sets out to obey the requirements of a commission or design a fabric, she also sets out to create works of art. In a life that is structured by art, weaving, “as a way of constructing your own life,”



Detail of *Cesta Lunar* #23 (see opposite page)

as de Amaral explains, she has in the last many years continued her explorations with both basic weave and the painted “complete colors” (gold, red and blue) – colors chosen because of their meaning and use in the life and the cultural landscape of Colombia. Nothing of the past is unreal.

Today, we enter her world with the new works in which there is a stunning release of energy and creativity. These works transcend common sentiment in the art world, helping to abolish the dichotomy between art and craft. The conventional rectilinear format is revitalized by a richness of surface on which actual volume is created by structures and new and invented techniques of fabrication, sometimes producing a rippling effect. Some are contained within plaited borders. In the final analysis, the loom is the elemental tool.

When you walk into a space with one *Rios* or a space glowing with *Rioses*, *Pueblos* and *Tablas*, you do not “read” these works for their iconography. You do not try to decipher the process. You are presented with an elegant order all their own. The pieces project an aura of extreme quiet – not timorous – but alive with a piercing, breathtaking beauty. You are invited into her world through a work of art.

Olga de Amaral makes art objects that are visual tracteries, taking us into “lost images and inherited landscapes” as she, the artist, goes beyond and beyond.

Mildred Constantine
New York City, April 1992

Notes

1. *Ancient Arts of the Andes*, Museum of Modern Art, 1954
2. Center for Inter-American Relations, foreword to exhibition
3. *Beyond Craft*, 1973, Van Nostrand Reinhold, New York City, p. 102

Acknowledgment

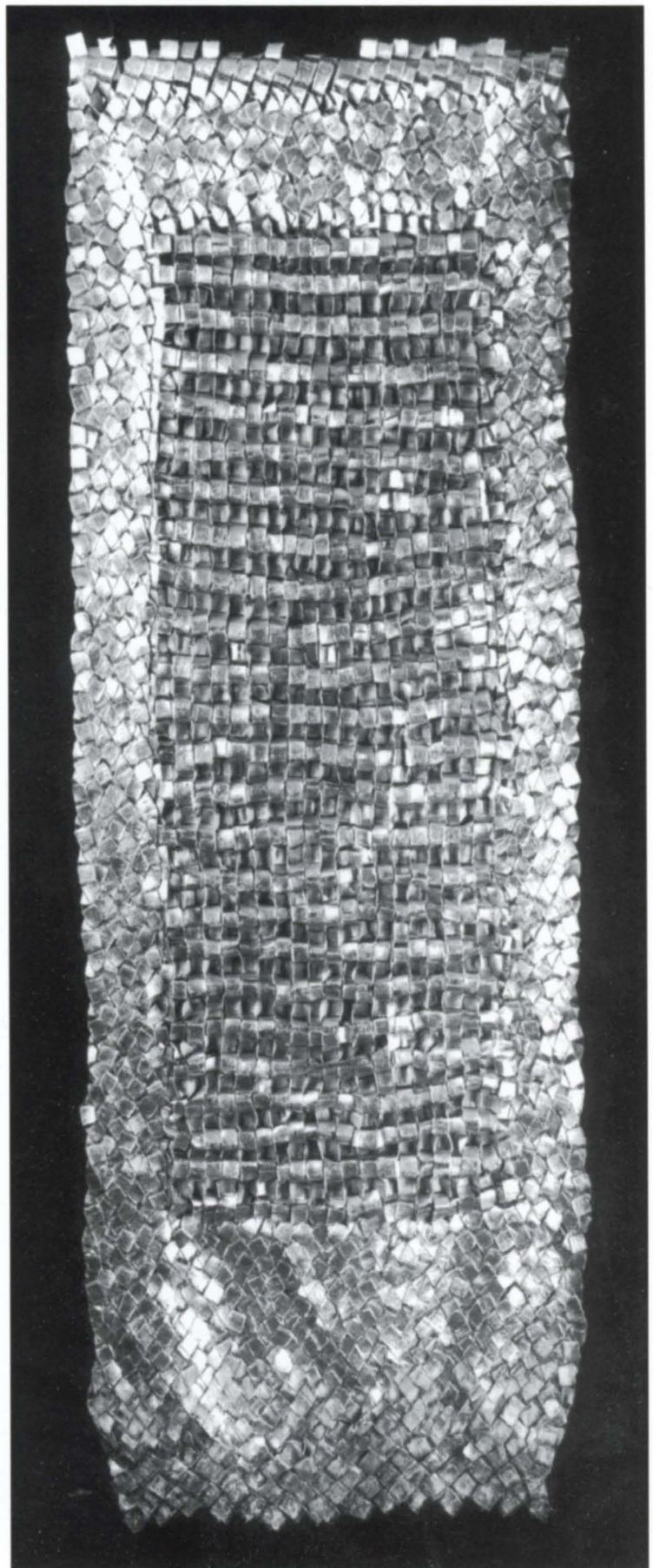
We are deeply grateful to Olga de Amaral for her generous and considerate assistance with this exhibition. Several works were completed specifically for the exhibit, and for this, we are particularly appreciative.

Charlotte and Bob Kornstein of Bellas Artes Gallery, Santa Fe, N.M., are to be thanked for their unflagging support of Olga de Amaral’s work and this show. Their knowledge of and insight into her work has been most important.

Finally, our gratitude goes to Mildred Constantine for her fine essay on de Amaral’s work, as well as her long-time commitment and numerous contributions to the appreciation and understanding of textiles.

Bruce Hartman, director
Gallery of Art

Cover: *Lost Image #6*, Olga de Amaral, fiber, paint, gold and silver leaf, 1992, Courtesy of Bellas Artes Gallery, Santa Fe, N.M.



Cesta Lunar #23, Olga de Amaral, fiber, gold leaf, paint, 1989, Courtesy of the artist

Olga de Amaral

Biographical Information

1932 Born in Bogotá, Colombia.

1951 Receives diploma as architectural draftsman from Colegio Mayor de Cundinamarca, Bogotá, and is named director of the same.

1954 Studies weaving at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Mich., with Marianne Strengel; there she meets fellow student and future husband Jim Amaral.

1955 Begins her custom-weaving studio in Bogotá.

1957 Marries Jim Amaral and shortly thereafter has her first one-person show at the Sociedad Colombiana de Arquitectos.

1958 The weaving studio, Telas Amaral, progresses, producing custom-designed fabrics for upholstery, drapery and area rugs. Jack Lenor Larsen visits the studio.

1965 Founds and directs the textile department of the Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá. Larsen again visits Bogotá and invites de Amaral to exhibit in his showroom in New York City.

1966 Has a one-person show at the Museo de Bellas Artes in Caracas, Venezuela.

1967 Participates in the *3rd Internationale Biennale of Tapestry* in Lausanne, Switzerland.

1968 Represents Colombia at World Crafts Council (WCC) in Lima, Peru.

1969 Takes part in exhibition in New York's Museum of Modern Art. Participates in the *4th Internationale Biennale of Tapestry* in Lausanne, Switzerland.

1970 The Museum of Contemporary Crafts has a one-person show of de Amaral's first of a series of *Woven Walls*.

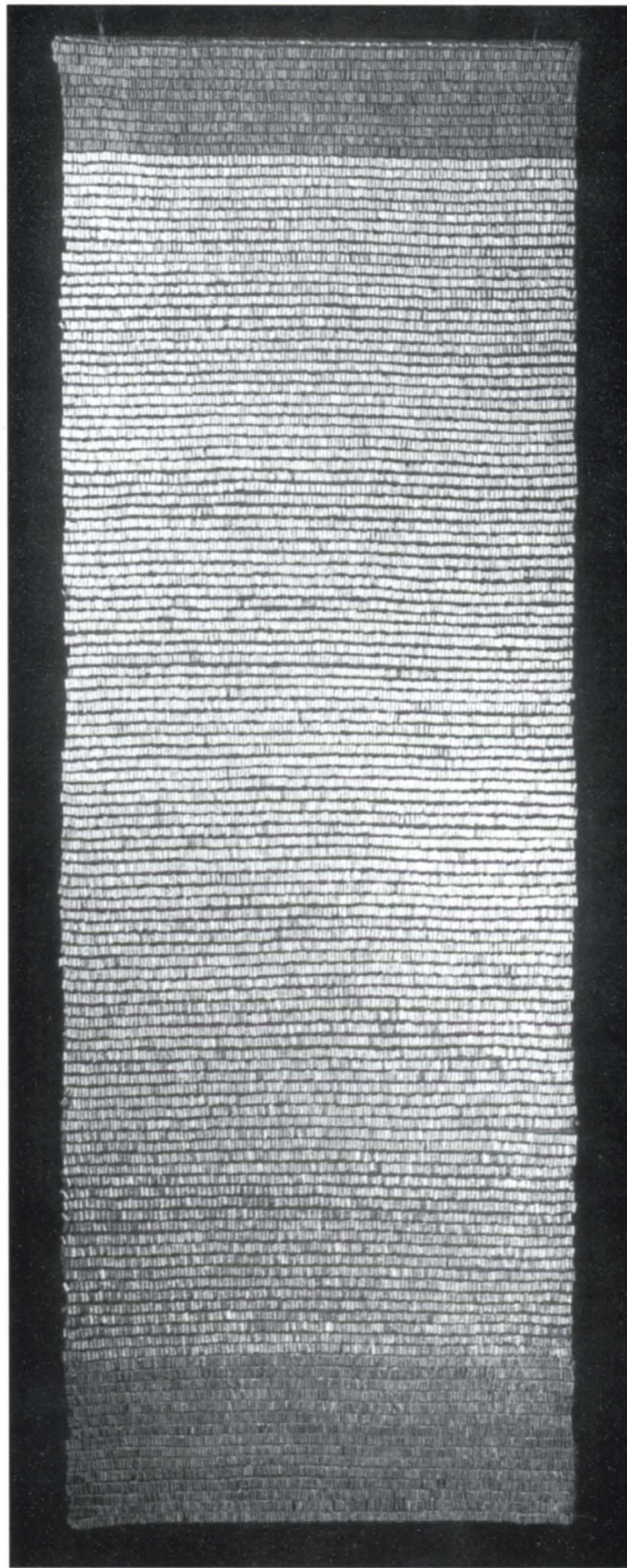


Tabla #15, Olga de Amaral, fiber, gold leaf, paint, 1990, Courtesy of Bellas Artes Gallery, Santa Fe, N.M.

1970, continued Meets Lucie Rie at the WCC conference in Ireland; Rie's use of gold on mended pots sparks the inspiration to use gold leaf on future tapestries. At the WCC meeting she is named Latin American representative, a position she is to hold for seven years.

1973 Is awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, which allows her to live the following year in Paris. Has one-person show at the Galerie La Demeure in Paris, France, where she exhibits large *Woven Walls* and different studies of knot structures.

1974 Initiates a series of small tapestries with details in gold leaf while living in Paris. This series leads to her future work titled *Alquimias*.

1975 Participates in the *7th Internationale Biennale of Tapestry* of Lausanne and in *Colombian Art through the Centuries* at the Petit Palais, Paris.

1977 Receives an invitation to participate in the WCC reunion in Kyoto, Japan, and is included in a show at the Museum of Modern Art in Kyoto. Exhibits in the *8th Internationale Biennale of Tapestry*, Lausanne.

1981 Participates in the *Art Fabric Mainstream* show curated by Larsen and Mildred Constantine at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

1986 Represents Colombia at the *42nd Venice Biennale*.

1987 Included in *The Elemental Fabric* touring exhibition, which opens at the American Craft Museum in New York.

1988 Participates in *New Traditions* at Nordenfjeldske Kunindustrimuseum in Norway.

1990 Participates in the *33rd Salon Nacional de Artistas* in Bogotá and later spends time in Santa Fe, N.M., where she studies Pueblo textiles.