

The Sun Queen

Olga de Amaral's dazzling weavings, potent and physical, make the cosmos tangible



Colombian artist Olga de Amaral's sumptuous textiles communicate in tantalizing mixed messages: "Come!" they seem to sing out from across the room. But, as when approaching royalty, you know you dare get only so close to the textiles' weighty surfaces elaborated in gold leaf. They read as visually warm yet emotionally cool; inviting yet reserved; shiny and new—with a hint of the futuristic in their glinting threads—yet rooted in ancient traditions of textile arts.

No straight line leads from the formative impressions in de Amaral's life to final manifestations in her art. Many see Colombian gold and its history as embedded deeply into de Amaral's textiles. Gold's burnished hues shine, refract, dazzle. Gold embellishes the thrones and robes of gods and kings. But if de Amaral's work speaks of these cultural associations, it also intuits from personal history in ways that appear profound. From her childhood excursions into the lush, green countryside of Andean rivers and mountain heights, to her adult life in Bogotá, a city teeming with crowded streets and rich with gilded churches, de Amaral has relied on her own tangible experience, the visual and the emotional, to sustain her work.

Reflections on water, constantly moving and changing: moonlit silver, sunset gold. Bright, saturated colors: vegetables, fruit, and woven garments hanging in outdoor markets.

"I think in impressions and concepts. It is very abstract," the 75-year-old artist remarks in a phone conversation from her apartment in Bogotá. Yet she acknowledges a diversity of influences informing her practice as an international textile artist, working often on an architectural scale.



The stelae that appear at Olga de Amaral's country house are echoed in the upright forms of her Stelae series of textiles.

De Amaral says that gold as an integral element of her country's past entered fully into her consciousness only after she returned home from studying weaving for two years (1954–55) at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan and spent time wandering through and absorbing objects in Bogotá's art museums. The fields of her childhood produced an even deeper well of visual and emotional impressions. "I had a wonderful childhood," she relates. "I enjoyed the landscape, the whitewashed towns, all those things that were part of a very wonderful Colombia at the time."

Dark, regal colors; contours of hills and valleys, seen from above.

In her work today, de Amaral employs shimmering effects that can be suggestive of forces of the cosmos as well as experiments

with color fields—a prevailing painting style when she studied art in the 1950s. With such an intricacy of experimentation in her work, de Amaral's expression is foremost contemporary. Majestic, it is also earthly.

Shadow and candles in the depths of Catholic churches; light flickering on plaster walls. A young girl's experience of sacred mystery.

De Amaral was born into a family of engineers. After high school she studied architectural drafting for two years at Colegio Mayor de Cundinamarca in Bogotá. It wasn't architecture itself that interested her, however, but color, design, and the arrangement of forms in space. Then at Cranbrook she found herself immersed in an intensive

period of creative "awakening," as she puts it, that introduced her to both the loom and an American art scene in which narrow artistic categories were already beginning to overlap and break down. Since then, her creative vision has transcended the fiber medium and incorporates elements of painting, sculpture, and installation along with weaving techniques.

"Her work is both personal and universal at the same time. If you think of Bogotá and the Colombian countryside, you see where she's coming from, yet her art makes the same impact even if you haven't seen that," notes Jane Adlin, associate curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Adlin places de Amaral with a handful of important fiber artists—among them Lenore Tawney, Claire Zeisler, and Sheila



"The House of My Imagination," as de Amaral calls this abandoned house in the Colombian countryside, grabbed hold of her creative life years ago. Elements of the house's architecture, along with its emotional resonance for her, underlie patterns, shapes, and motifs that recur in de Amaral's work.

Hicks—who, beginning in the 1960s, helped liberate textile art from the confines of a loom-based, utilitarian focus to merge, in particular, with sculptural and three-dimensional fine art.

Since then, de Amaral's work has been showcased in museum exhibitions worldwide and is in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Museum of Arts and Design in New York, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Musée national d'Art moderne in Paris, among others. And as a striking component of interior design, especially in contemporary architecture, her art is in dozens of corporate and private collections around the globe. Among these: three 10-by-8-foot tapestries that shimmer against the pale marble of a soar-

ing atrium wall in the Four Seasons hotel in Hong Kong and a grouping of irregularly shaped pieces called *Stelae*, gold on one side and dark silver on the other, that hang in the London lobby of the investment-banking concern Cantor Fitzgerald.

Jack Lenor Larsen, an internationally known textile designer, author, collector, and curator, has known de Amaral for almost 50 years. He observes, "She's thoughtful, experimental, humble. Her work keeps evolving." One driving force in that evolution for a number of years is what the artist has described as a long search for "how I could turn textile into golden surfaces of light." Her use of gold leaf began in the early 1970s as highlights on a series of small, strongly textural pieces called *Complete Fragments*. Gradually it covered more of the surface in her works.

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A viewer approaching a series of new de Amaral works at Bellas Artes Gallery in Santa Fe (her exclusive representative for more than 20 years) encounters the potent physical presence of these weavings.

No single visual perspective contains the complete experience of standing before pieces such as *Imagen Paisaje I*. Viewed at an angle from the right, the tapestry's entire surface appears as burnished gold. Step to the left of the piece and the gold virtually disappears, replaced by wide horizontal bands of saturated color: blue, purple, brown, orange, and green. Then move back to the middle and look at the piece straight on. Now you see both: deep hues and rippling, irregular vertical patterns of gold. There is a sense of extraordinary richness that comes not only from the gold but also from an abundance of woven material. The thickly overlapping strands of fiber conjure an image of digging into a treasure chest with both hands, booty spilling out extravagantly.

Such an artwork, after a few moments, demands that you step even closer to try and



cotton, which she calls elements. These elements, linked together in strands, are covered with white gesso and then gold or silver leaf. Frequently the opposite side and connecting threads are painted using rich, natural pigments. Finally, in many variations, elements and strands are joined, plaited, and woven into tapestries whose visual qualities are as mutable as energy and light. In many cases closely



make sense of its structure and parts. Here you understand that this was the work of deft hands over hours and days. You notice in this piece that all the woven rectangles are covered with gold leaf; it is only their backs and edges, and the threads between them, that contain other colors. The artist's arrangement of the woven components, on precise angles, produces a chameleon effect.

During the past 20 years, the material foundation of de Amaral's art has largely been small rectangles of tightly woven linen and



Top: Olga de Amaral's finished weavings are frequently placed in architectural settings for their scale—and ability to pack a visual wallop through the majesty of their forms.

Bottom: Works in progress include squares of woven linen and cotton that have been prepared with gesso and rice paper for the application of gold leaf (left); the raw materials (right).

TOP AND RIGHT: COURTESY OF BELLA ARTES GALLERY

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ARTIST STUDIO

set elements appear either darker or more brightly reflective, like scales on a fish, depending on their angle of placement and the angle of view.

Doors and windows—some shuttered, some open to the day—in a large, abandoned house in the Colombian countryside: light to darkness, darkness to light.

In order to accomplish her oeuvre de Amaral adopted what Larsen refers to as “an older tradition” more common in Europe and other parts of the world than North America, in which the artist conceives the vision and directs skilled artisans to carry out much of the labor-intensive process. In de Amaral’s studio, consisting of a number of rooms in a house not far from her apartment in Bogotá, the same seven women have worked with her for 30 years. De Amaral oversees their work and creates some parts of the weaving, while her corps does others. For the artist, intimate familiarity with materials and technique is akin to playing a piano; once it is mastered, creativity can freely flow. “In every kind of art, process is what takes you. It’s a tool, not an end,” she maintains, adding that the environment of women working together in her studio is “wonderful, peaceful. It’s like an orchestra.”

In her studio these days de Amaral continues to explore the possibilities of gold and silver for expressing concepts such as umbra, which she describes as the “special mysterious shadow that [holds] the moon in eclipse.” She also is returning to ideas she began forming in the past few years but didn’t take to completion. As in all her work, these ideas are undefined until they meet the tangible materials of her art in a process guided by intuition, experimentation, and decades of experience. As she puts it, “I know what I’m doing and I know what I’m looking for—without knowing.”

Stepping in close to de Amaral’s tapestries, one encounters a rhythm like that of life: Patterns of infinite repetition, pleasant and tedious moments, materials both earthbound and ethereal, the work is a compass, a gestalt.

Shining odes to humanness and infinity. ✿

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