

Magdalena
Abakanowicz

Textile
Territories

Hommage
to Elsi Giauque

23.6.2023 –
24.9.2023

Exhibition
Guide

MUSÉE CANTONAL DES
BEAUX-ARTS LAUSANNE

FONDATION
TOMS PAULI

Abakanowicz envisioned her sculptures as installations and environments that invite a physical experience. The present exhibition reflects the artist's intention, while at the same time observing conservation and security requirements.

Please refrain from touching the artworks.

Podcast: *The artist's voice* (in French)
Magdalena Abakanowicz talks about her technique, the metaphysical aspects of her practice, and her freedom of expression. You can listen to the audio before, during or after the visit = 6 mins.



The *Textile Territories* exhibition traces the early stages of the international career of Magdalena Abakanowicz (1930–2017), a prominent textile and sculpture artist of the second half of the 20th century. From 1962 a major figure of the Lausanne International Tapestry Biennials, Abakanowicz shaped the landscape of the New Tapestry movement for twenty years, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, with her very personal output that focused on the use of organic fibre, that is a living and malleable material.

Her first weavings, relief tapestries, large-scale soft sculptural works, castings, knotted works, and drawings demonstrate the power and originality of the Polish artist's oeuvre during the key period from 1960 to 1985. In a Poland under communist rule, she seized on the potential of working with fibre (sisal, wool, and linen) to translate into three-dimensions a vision inspired by her observations of nature and humans, and create a new mode of artistic expression.

Exhibited in Europe and around the world, Abakanowicz gained international recognition on the contemporary art scene in the 1980s for her monumental installations and environments made of plant fibre, as well as bronze, stone and steel.

Lausanne played a key role in the development of the Polish artist's career and personal contacts thanks to the Tapestry Biennials, the exhibitions organised by Pierre and Alice Pauli, and local collectors.

In counterpoint to the universe of Abakanowicz, the room featuring the colourful geometric compositions of Elsi Giauque (1900–1989) highlights the Swiss artist's explorations of space and transparency, illustrating the important innovations brought to textile art during the Lausanne Biennials.

1st Floor Room 1

Magdalena Abakanowicz studied painting and weaving, and in 1954 graduated from the Warsaw Academy of Plastic Arts. For a few years she worked as a designer of interior decoration projects. Yet the young artist's real interest lay in the expressive potential of weaving.

This room traces the beginnings of Abakanowicz's textile-art investigations: paintings on cloth with organic motifs, experimental weavings inspired by the Polish avant-garde (informal art and Constructivism), large-scale compositions displayed at international art biennials, and technical designs and drawings.

Magdalena Abakanowicz's name was added to the list of artists invited in 1962 to represent Poland at the First Lausanne International Tapestry Biennial. Her weaving style, based on the nature and physical properties of the threads she used and executed without a cartoon (1:1 scale model) as guidance, attracted viewers' attention with its unusually crafted structure.

Magdalena Abakanowicz Structures

In 1965, at the 2nd Lausanne Tapestry Biennial, Abakanowicz exhibited *Desdemona*. The works of the Polish artists, and in particular hers, sparked a quarrel between the champions of traditional tapestry and the young artists claiming complete creative freedom. That same year, the artist was awarded the Gold Medal in Applied Arts at the 8th São Paulo Art Biennial and was widely commended by professionals and the general public alike.

From 1967, Abakanowicz devised mural works with contours and structural features that further accentuated the organic aspect of her weaving (*Assemblage noir*). In the summer of 1967, Alice Pauli organized in her own gallery in Lausanne a first solo show for the artist featuring pieces in relief; ten more followed in the period up to 1985.

1st Floor Room 2

In the mid-1970s, after gaining prominence in Lausanne and worldwide, Abakanowicz temporarily abandoned her weavings and assemblages of soft elements such as the *Abakans* (2nd floor room), to focus on the human figure and its fibrous structure. Her hollowed-out figures, made of bits of sack cloth and stiffened with resin, are a reminder that men, women, and plants all come from the organic world and are composed of the same biological elements. The *Backs*, *Heads*, and *Embryology* series, represented here in ink and gouache drawings, have a special place in the artist's oeuvre.

For the *Alterations* cycle, Abakanowicz produced multiple three-dimensional impressions of bodies with truncated heads, arms and legs, that depict the conflicts and horrors of humanity. She crafted fragments – hands, heads, and faces – that evoke images of loss and decay. The artist was inspired by her childhood memories marked by the trauma of war (her wounded mother lost an arm), and also by her observations of the dangers facing a society that was disconnected from the natural world and its origins. In this respect, Abakanowicz was close in her artistic expression to the fundamental issues, still topical today, interpreted by younger generations of artists.

Magdalena Abakanowicz Alterations

Even though the 1970s saw a proliferation of the artist's solo exhibitions and the production of numerous installations in Europe and other continents, Abakanowicz nonetheless remained faithful to Lausanne, to the Tapestry Biennials, to the projects organized by the Alice Pauli Gallery as well as to her Lausanne friends and patrons, the collector couple Pierre and Marguerite Magnenat.

The close and profound links that connected Abakanowicz to Lausanne for 25 years led to a series of donations, now grouped in the Fondation Toms Pauli's 20th-Century Collection, some of which can be seen in this room.

The Lausanne International Tapestry Biennials (1962–1995)

After the Second World War, tapestry art entered a new era. Across Europe, private workshops and national manufactories took an active part in this revival. By organizing the Biennials, Lausanne became the international showcase for contemporary tapestry and an inspirational forum for meeting and sharing ideas. The Biennial provided a platform that stimulated ground-breaking developments in the medium, that ultimately took tapestry away from the wall and on to textile sculpture and Fiber Art.

The Biennial was the brainchild of the art enthusiasts Pierre (1916–1970) and Alice Pauli (1922–2022) and the French artist Jean Lurçat, whose joint efforts on the project morphed into a lasting friendship. With support from the City of Lausanne and the Cantonal Fine Arts Museum, their collaboration gave rise to CITAM (French acronym for International Centre for Ancient and Modern Tapestry). Through to 1995, the 16 editions of the Biennials spurred the transition from traditional tapestry to the New Tapestry movement, a form of free art that flouted established art categories.

Over a period of two decades, Abakanowicz participated in ten Lausanne Biennials, Giauque, in eight. Their artworks were shown at all the major international collective exhibitions devoted to tapestry. The two artists held each other in high esteem.



Magdalena Abakanowicz and Elsi Giauque
at the Alice Pauli Gallery, 1975
Photo © Estate Leonardo Bezzola



Vernissage, 4th Lausanne Tapestry Biennial, 1969
Marcel Imsand © Photo Elysée, Lausanne

1st Floor Room 3

Elsi Giauque

Elsi Giauque (1900–1989), the doyenne and leader of the Swiss artists of the New Tapestry movement, completed her studies in Zurich. She was fascinated by the principles of Constructivism, taught by Sophie Taueber-Arp and Otto Morach, which she applied to textiles.

By 1945, she was already questioning traditional tapestry, employing unusual materials such as corn husks and sisal on her loom. She anticipated what 20 years later would be considered a revolution.

Giauque worked as a textile designer in fashion and interior decoration. She handled numerous public commissions, collaborating closely with architects to find ways to incorporate textiles into constructed space. From 1950, her student Käthi Wenger (1922–2017) became a regular assistant.

After 20 years teaching at the Zurich Arts and Crafts School, where she trained many textile artists, Elsi Giauque retired in 1965 to devote herself fully to free creation. It was then that audacious geometric, mural, and spatial compositions started to emerge, reflecting her research into colour and shape combinations and transparency effects.

At the 4th Lausanne Biennial in 1969, Giauque showcased *Elément virtuel spatial* (Virtual Spatial Element), a variable-configuration installation composed of frames stretched with warp threads. Like Abakanowicz's *Red Abakan* exhibited the same year, this work marks a decisive stage in the new spatial conception of tapestry. The artist plays with the different textures and materials and the superposition of colours, which change depending on the viewer's point of view.

2nd Floor

Magdalena Abakanowicz Sculpting Space

At the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, Magdalena Abakanowicz produced impressive woven sculptures suspended in the air, which would change the perceptions of tapestry art and sculpture. In fact, Abakanowicz created a new form of artistic expression that defied categorization.

In 1964, an art critic who was disconcerted by the ambiguity of her work came up with the term *Abakan*, based on her surname. Abakanowicz adopted the name and used it to designate her large-scale, three-dimensional works. The unclassifiable character of the artist's production prompted a new awareness of soft woven sculptures as artworks in their own right, outside the scope of arts and crafts, and applied arts.

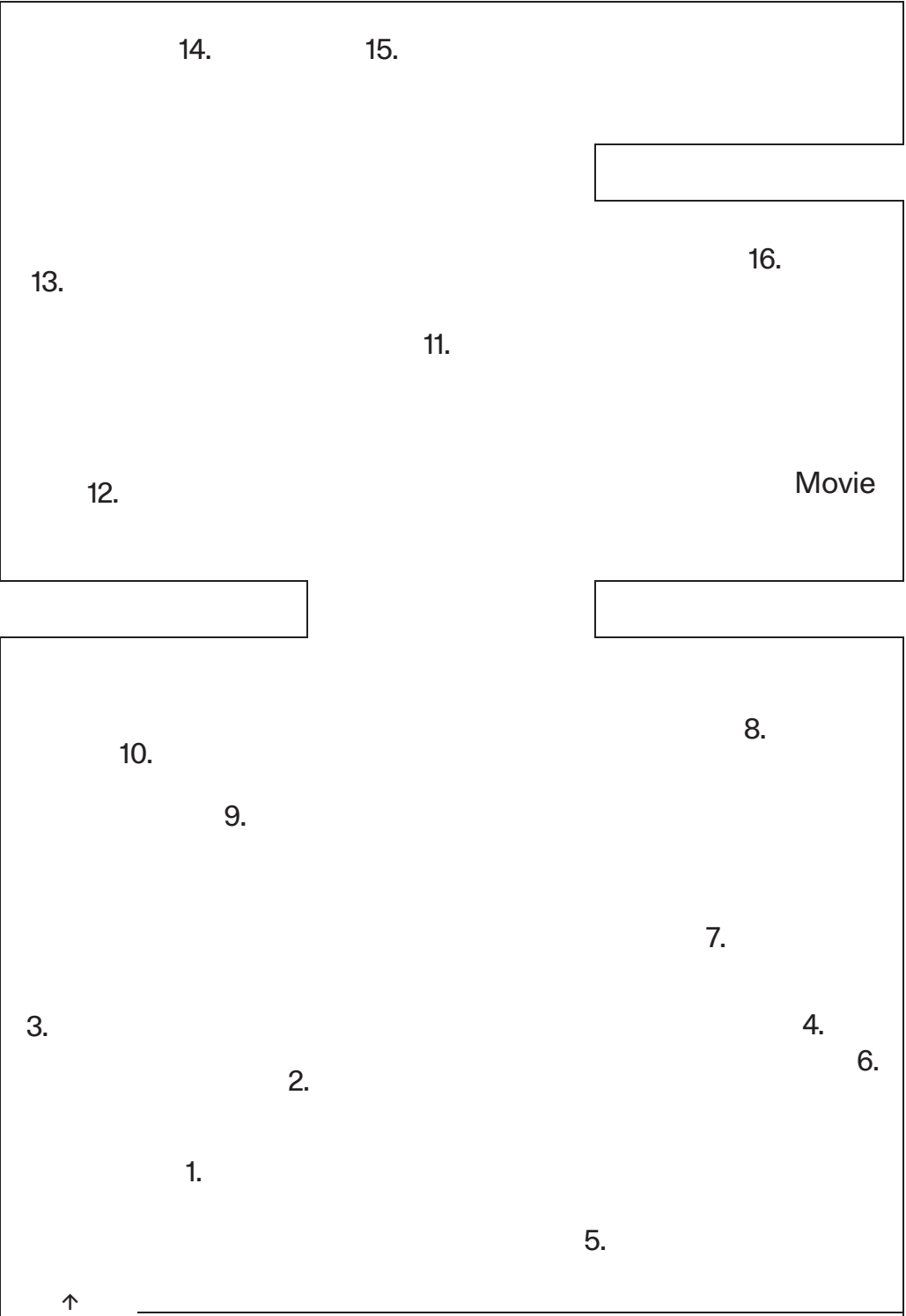
Abakanowicz did not want her exhibitions to be seen as an alignment of objects. On the contrary, they should depict the tensions between the different elements, between light, shadows, and darkness. These mysterious and reassuring shapes of her creations are rooted in the organic world, beautiful and disturbing, and throbbing with life-giving energy.

These malleable, even transformable *Abakans* were displayed by the artist in dense arrangements that she first called 'situations in space', and then 'environments'. Abakanowicz considered every exhibition as an artwork in itself. She personally decided the placement of each piece and grouped them according to the space available in galleries and museums, or in the open air as for the film *Abakany* (*Abakans*) produced in the sand dunes on the Baltic coast. Abakanowicz always wanted the viewer, the recipient of her work, to experience completely new sensations as they moved around inside her installations.

In this room, large *Abakans* are assembled alongside several mural works created by the artist specifically for the interiors of some private homes in western Switzerland.

2nd Floor Plan

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. <i>Abakan étroit</i> (Narrow Abakan), 1967–1968
Sisal and wool
Fondation Toms Pauli, Lausanne | 9. <i>Abakan rouge</i> (Abakan Red), 1969
Sisal
Tate, London |
| 2. <i>Abakan rond</i> (Abakan Round), 1967–1968
Sisal
National Museum, Wrocław | 10. <i>Abakan rouge III</i> (Abakan Red III), 1970–1971
Sisal
Fondation Toms Pauli, Lausanne |
| 3. <i>Abakan 29</i> , 1967–1968
Sisal and wool
Fondation Toms Pauli, Lausanne | 11. <i>Abakan – Situation variable II</i> (Abakan Variable Situation II), 1971
Sisal and rope
City of Bienne Art Collection |
| 4. <i>Abakan vert</i> (Abakan Green), 1967–1968
Sisal
Private collection, Warsaw | 12. <i>Abakan brun</i> (Abakan Brown), 1969
Sisal
Röhsska Museum, Göteborg |
| 5. <i>Manteau brun</i> (Brown Coat), 1968
Sisal
Henie Onstad Collection
Henie Onstad Art Centre, Høvikodden | 13. Untitled (mural creation for Mrs Alice Pauli), 1979–1980
Sisal and linen
Fondation Toms Pauli, Lausanne |
| 6. <i>Grande Fleur</i> (Large Flower), 1981
Sisal and linen
Fondation Toms Pauli, Lausanne | 14. <i>Abakan janvier-février</i> , (Abakan January-February) 1972
Sisal
National Museum, Wrocław |
| 7. <i>Abakan orange</i> (Abakan Orange), 1968
Sisal
National Museum, Stockholm | 15. <i>Boule noire</i> (Black Ball), 1975
Sisal
Private collection, Warsaw |
| 8. <i>Abakan orange</i> (Abakan Orange), 1971
Sisal
Tate, London | 16. <i>Abakan jaune</i> (Abakan Yellow), 1970
Sisal and rope
National Museum, Poznań |



Biographies

Magdalena Abakanowicz

1930

Marta Magdalena Abakanowicz is born in Falenty, near Warsaw.

1939–1961

Her privileged childhood on the family estate is shattered by the Second World War and the arrival of a communist government.

After studying painting and weaving at the Warsaw Academy of Plastic Arts, works for a time as interior designer.

Marries engineer, Jan Kosmowski, in 1956, and becomes a member of the Association of Polish Artists and Designers. Her first solo exhibition in Warsaw in 1960 is closed by the government for non-conformity with socialist ideals.

1962–1981

Is selected among other Polish artists to participate in the 1st Lausanne Tapestry Biennial in 1962, where her *Composition of White Forms* tapestry is widely acclaimed. Befriends Pierre and Alice Pauli; Alice Pauli Gallery organises eleven solo exhibitions from 1967 to 1985. Takes part in every edition of the Lausanne Biennials from 1962 to 1979.

First use of term *Abakan* by a Polish art critic. Invited to participate in the 8th São Paulo Art Biennial, she is awarded the Gold Medal in Applied Arts for her large-scale tapestries.

Appointed professor at the State Higher School of Plastic Arts in Poznań in 1965; a position she holds until retirement.

Start of her international career, with major exhibitions in Europe and then worldwide. Recognition of her work in her home country. Represents Poland at the 39th Venice Biennale in 1980. Travels to many countries to install her works in museums, galleries, and private homes.

1982–2017

Major travelling retrospective exhibition and development of her USA career. Shifts focus to sculptures in metal. Works with the Marlborough Gallery in New York. Her collaboration with the Alice Pauli Gallery comes to an end. Creates numerous outdoor monumental environments, in bronze, steel, metal, wood and stone.

Dies in Warsaw in 2017.

Elsi Giauque

1900

Born Berta Elsa Kleinpeter in Wald, near Zurich.

1918–1922

At Zurich Arts and Crafts School studies textiles under Sophie Taeuber-Arp, and design under Otto Morach. Is strongly influenced by Swiss Constructivism and Concrete Art.

Meets interior designer and painter Fernand Giauque (1895–1971), whom she marries in 1925.

1923–1943

The couple take up residence at the Festi estate, in Ligerz, overlooking the Lake of Bienne. They create a puppet theatre and produce public shows for 20 years. A regional artists' colony builds up around them.

Fashion and interior designer for textile industry. Works closely with architects on many public commissions in Switzerland.

1944–1964

After breaking with Fernand Giauque, she accepts a teaching position in textile research at the Zurich Arts and Crafts School. To help fulfil abundant commissions, she brings former students to Festi, including Käthi Wenger (1922–2017) who becomes her principal collaborator and moves into the estate. Creates two floor rugs for the 1964 Swiss National Exhibition.

Very active member of the Swiss Union of Craftsmen, Artists and Architects (Werkbund).

1965–1989

On retiring, she can at last devote her time to free creation. Participates in the 2nd Lausanne Biennial in 1965, followed by seven other editions until 1983. Exhibits at several other major shows in Switzerland. Continues her work around geometric abstraction in space.

Dies in Ligerz in 1989.

Organisation and Publications

Exhibition organised by Tate Modern, London, in collaboration with Fondation Toms Pauli at the Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne and Henie Onstad, Oslo.

Curated by:
Magali Junet, Curator, Giselle Eberhard Cotton, Director, Fondation Toms Pauli
Ann Coxon, Curator, International Art, Tate Modern; Mary Jane Jacob, Independent Curator.

The Tate curators' selection of works was reviewed for the Lausanne venue and has been augmented by twenty-five works from the Fondation Toms Pauli Collection and some lenders from the French-speaking part of Switzerland, as well as by a major series of *Backs*, on loan from the Tate. The choice of the additional works highlights the important donations that the State of Vaud received from the Pierre Pauli Association, the collectors Pierre and Marguerite Magnenat, and the Alice Pauli Gallery.

We hereby express our sincere gratitude to the Abakanowicz Arts and Culture Charitable Foundation that has provided support for the exhibition.



Publications:
Magdalena Abakanowicz à Lausanne, edited by Magali Junet and Giselle Eberhard Cotton; co-published by Fondation Toms Pauli, Lausanne, and Scheidegger & Spiess, Zurich, 2023, 128 pp. (Fr.). CHF 38.–

Magdalena Abakanowicz, edited by Ann Coxon and Mary Jane Jacob, Tate Publishing, London, 2022, 208 pp. (Eng.). CHF 42.–

at the MCBA Book- and Gift Shop during the show's run
→ shop.mcba@plateforme10.ch

Events

Reservations required for all events
→ mcba.ch/agenda

Guided tours (in French)
Thursday 20 July, 17 August, 21 September at 6:30pm
Every Sunday at 11am
(Summer break from 23.7 to 13.8)

Guided tour (in English)
Sunday 17 September at 2pm

Guided tours for Les Amis·e·s du MCBA
Tuesday 29 August at 12:30pm
With Giselle Eberhard Cotton
Thursday 7 September at 6pm
With Magali Junet

Final guided tour with the exhibition curators (in French)
Sunday 24 September at 3pm
With Giselle Eberhard Cotton and Magali Junet

Conference (in French)
Thursday 31 August at 6:30pm
Revoir Magdalena Abakanowicz à l'aune des biennales d'art contemporain
By Joana Badia, history of art student at the Sorbonne Université de Paris
Admission free

Writing workshop for adults (in French)
Saturday 16 September, 2–5pm
Fils de trame
Working with memories as the basic material. By exploring the fabric of our lives and its constituent strands, we can discover the close ties between two modes of expression: writing and weaving.
Mathias Howald's second novel, *Cousu pour toi* (Stitched for You) (published by Scribes/Gallimard) is about the NAMES Project Memorial Quilt created to celebrate and honour the memory of the people who have died of AIDS.
CHF 50.– + entrance ticket

Museum night
Saturday 23 September, 10am–2am

Creative workshops for children (in French)
Saturday 8 July and 9 September, 2–5pm
Du fil à retordre
Create amazing forms using threads, string, feathers and sequins, inspired by the works of the artists Magdalena Abakanowicz and Elsi Giauque.
9–15 years old / CHF 15.–

Tuesday 15, Wednesday 16, Thursday 17 August, 10–4:30pm
Jeux de fils
A one-day workshop to try out different weaving techniques and discover the work of the artists Magdalena Abakanowicz and Elsi Giauque.
9–15 years old
Part of Passeport vacances / to register
→ apvrl.ch

A free intergenerational workshop (in French)
Saturday 2 September, 11am–6pm, non-stop
Filer doux
With family or friends, try your hands on a weaving technique seen in the exhibition.
Free / no registration required

Kids activity booklet (in French)
Free, available at the reception desk

Program for schools and private tours → mcba.ch

Information

Hours:
Tuesday–Sunday 10am–6pm
Thursday 10am–8pm
Monday closed
1 August 10am–6pm
Federal Fast Monday 10am–6pm

Admission and Online Tickets:
→ mcba.ch/billetterie
First Saturday of the month: free

Access:
SBB Lausanne train station,
3 minutes on foot
Bus: 1, 3, 20, 21, 60,
Gare stop
Bus: 6, Cecil stop
Metro: m2, Gare stop
Car: Montbenon parking,
Reduced fee

Musée cantonal
des Beaux-Arts
PLATEFORME 10
Place de la Gare 16
1003 Lausanne
Switzerland

T +41 21 318 44 00
mcba@plateforme10.ch
www.mcba.ch
 @mcbalausanne
 @mcba.lausanne

Other shows on view
this summer at MCBA:

Espace Focus
Groupe CAYC.
Buenos Aires – Lausanne
19.5 – 27.8.2023
Free admission

Espace Projet
Emily Jacir.
We Ate the Wind
26.5 – 27.8.2023
Free admission

The Collection
Free admission

Exhibition organised by Tate
Modern, in collaboration
with Fondation Toms Pauli, the
MCBA and Henie Onstad.



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