



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Sheila Hicks, 2004
March 18

Funding for this interview was provided by the Nanette L. Laitman
Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Sheila Hicks on March 18, 2004. The interview took place in Paris, France, and was conducted by Cristobal Zañartu for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

Sheila Hicks and Cristobal Zañartu have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

CRISTOBAL ZAÑARTU: This is Cristobal Zañartu interviewing Sheila Hicks at her home in Paris, France, in the same courtyard – a seventeenth-century courtyard with cobblestones – as her studio in the Latin quarter, which is near the Seine River and the Pont Neuf. We are March 18th, 2004, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Disc number one. Nanette Laitman Project.

While being interviewed by Monique Lévi-Strauss, you told us you were born in Nebraska, went to several high schools before attending two universities: Syracuse followed by Yale University.

With this varied schooling experience, can you discuss the difference, if any, between a university-trained artist and one who has learned her craft outside academia?

MS. HICKS: The craft that you're referring to I presume is working with textile, tapestry and bas-relief or sculpture made with fiber. So my craft would be form-making with soft materials.

Has it helped me to do this in a university or outside of a university context? Well, I've never done it in a university. I never had any opportunity in the schools I attended to work with yarn, textiles, or fiber, so whatever I've learned has been outside of a university context. Now, I don't even know if today there are universities or colleges teaching this kind of craft.

I remember that Cranbrook and Rhode Island School of Design and the school of the Art Institute in Chicago and California, somewhere, had programs where they gave degrees and helped people to work in a university-based program with this kind of craft. I never had any exposure to that except when I was invited to teach, or lecture, or give a workshop in some of these places.

I guess I'm not very helpful in evaluating craft training within a university.

MR. ZAÑARTU: Well, then can I ask if you apprenticed with anyone?

MS. HICKS: I've never apprenticed with anyone or worked in anybody's workshop or studio. I've worked in the field: in Mexico, Peru, Chile, Bolivia, Ecuador, India, Morocco, Japan, France, and Germany. I've observed, photographed, sketched, drawn, diagrammed, and recorded how things are made by hand-weavers and in textile factories, but I've never had the privilege of working as anyone's assistant.

MR. ZAÑARTU: I guess in the context of the Nanette Laitman Project it's hard to follow the usual questions we would ask a craftsman, and I see that you are mostly self-taught. Can you share with us then something about your travels and where and how you've picked up your craft?

MS. HICKS: Don't forget I had a formal Bauhaus-type art education at Yale where I studied color, composition, design, materials – behavior of materials – sculpture, painting, and the history of art and architecture for five years.

MR. ZAÑARTU: So in that sense you've had university training in the form – in art. Now, applying that to craft?

MS. HICKS: Yes, an artist is a craftsman, so my craft developed while trying to learn and find ways to make my art. Therefore, I'm improvising continually and doing things that are not formally pre-determined. I'm trying out new things all the time using methods of construction and speaking with materials, to phrase my inner thoughts.

MR. ZAÑARTU: Do you think of yourself as part of any tradition? Are you searching for things in your work or are you on a path of traditional artistic research?

MS. HICKS: I've come to think of myself over the years as on a quest – not a religious quest or a spiritual quest, but a search for meaning in my life. Oscar Wilde said the meaning of life is in art. Maybe what has happened is I

have found the meaning of my life – in art.

MR. ZAÑARTU: Yet you say you feel lonely because you're not part of any gang or any art scene and when it comes to group exhibits, it's always a delicate situation of how or where you're placing yourself in shows.

MS. HICKS: That's true. At the same time I enjoy a feeling of belonging to a continuum in the history of textile creation. Today the art and crafts fields, the categories, and the curatorial tangents do not always leave open the possibility of my exhibiting or being participatory.

How do I explain that better? Most group exhibitions are thematic. I'm a bit out of time and theme since I've become isolated in a way. I'm a hybrid – an American living in France, so while I've been enriched by having this bicultural exposure and involvement, I've separated myself from the main thrust or movement in a particular geographical location. I am independent, therefore, sometimes alone.

I know Californian artists communicate strongly with each other in the textile arts and crafts. Just as Midwesterners: Nebraska, Minneapolis, Chicago, Kansas, Michigan, and then again the East Coast, and the South, too.

I'm not a part of any of those communities, although I'm interested in all of them. Here in France, I've been active in the discussions and the polemical face-offs concerning the history of European tapestry versus contemporary tapestry-making. Something that American artists are not touched by whatsoever.

MR. ZAÑARTU: You're talking about the ancient or traditional tapestries of Aubusson, Gobelins and Beauvais?

MS. HICKS: Yes, may I give you an example?

When I started participating in the Lausanne Biennales of tapestry and began making three-dimensional objects and sculptural forms, writers, journalists, and reviewers of these shows cited me, along with two or three others, as breakthrough artists causing tapestry-making, textile art, to come into a new era. Not long ago, someone called my attention to an article in the –

MR. ZAÑARTU: Entry?

MS. HICKS: A sort of entry in the *Encyclopedia Universalis*.

MR. ZAÑARTU: Which is *Britannica* in America?

MS. HICKS: Exactly. And in the recounting of the history of tapestry through the last eight centuries or more, the final photograph in the encyclopedia entry is of a work I made about 25 years ago showing what I've just described of the evolution of tapestry-making – a kind of new vision in tapestry art, so I found myself cited as someone who had become part of a long history and been assimilated in that history.

Surely that's because I live and work in France, exhibit and lecture frequently in France. Americans won't be concerned with or even interested in how European tapestry art developed probably.

MR. ZAÑARTU: Well, let's hope that interviews like this will change this. How does it make you feel to be a significant part of the history of your craft?

MS. HICKS: It appears I will have left a small trace with my work, with my concepts, and with my energy directed toward creativity with yarn and soft materials.

MR. ZAÑARTU: That's interesting because, the question was "did you apprentice with anyone?" and you explained that you sort of discovered your own path, but yet I know that you are also a great teacher and that you enjoy teaching very much. Will you please tell me how you approach teaching and some of the things you've learned the hard way?

MS. HICKS: This may be contradictory because often when asked that question I say I don't teach and I'm not attached to any school.

MR. ZAÑARTU: Except I happen to have seen you teaching classes at the Fontainebleau School of Art and Architecture, and taking huge drop cloths and throwing them in basins to see how wet textile reacts to the wind. The students got very excited because they had never been with a teacher so wild and creative, and to this day they say that you are one of the most memorable teachers they've had.

MS. HICKS: I'd like to think that's true. I've had short teaching experiences – very intense for me, and often the students come and follow-up and join me in my studio for a period of time before they go on and do their own work or carry on with their studies. It's exhausting to teach because I give myself over to it completely. I do it

because I like to be the student as well as the teacher; the process of discovery fascinates me when I'm the teacher and the student at the same time and I try to communicate enthusiasm and excitement for the experience that we share together.

MR. ZAÑARTU: But concretely, Monday morning you come to class. Do you have a vision of what you would like your students to have understood or accomplished by the end of the week or by the end of the session?

MS. HICKS: I have goals but am open to improvisation. A typical class or workshop would be the one I conducted at Middlebury College when I was the Johnson professor of art for the winter term, which was a three-week period. The class met for breakfast in local cafés – in as many different ones as possible. And from there we'd go to visit the boulangerie [bakery], the breadmaker, or the shoemaker, the dime store, the hardware store, or go to court and see what was on the docket for the day and sit in court for a while – the little courthouse in the town. We'd go to the newspaper office and see how they were turning out the news and treating it and sort of connecting with the environment – connecting with the place and people who were working and earning their livings. Then we would decide what we could create that would be meaningful to the community or to individuals.

And that was the sort of typical workshop that I also conducted in The Hague at the Kunst Academy or in Musashino Art University, near Tokyo, not too long ago. Can I call those classes? They're more like field trips and classes combined.

Now, the second part of it is –

MR. ZAÑARTU: I'm sorry to interrupt. Is fiber the main focus, or art or creativity?

MS. HICKS: Life. Starting with life and observing your immediate environment: sketching, writing, thinking, formulating, interiorizing – taking the exterior and bringing it to the interior. From the interior, begin to think in form-making terms and draw, write, sculpt, play. By the end of the workshop you share your personal work with others and plan a kind of small exhibition or exposé breaking out into public space. Now, of course, my thing is soft materials and fibers and textiles and there's just no way to get around it. It inevitably surfaces in anything you do when you observe and participate in daily life. You cannot escape textiles, fiber, and all the pliable, textural things that cause your existence to be enriched.

MR. ZAÑARTU: From what you're explaining, you've been more a teacher of life and creativity than a teacher of fiber arts per se. Is that because you yourself did not apprentice with anyone and you feel each student has to discover and invent his own way?

MS. HICKS: That would be ideal. Yes, it would be ideal – if you can just become conscious of how the environment nourishes you and to find your own way with your own voice, your own material, and your own method of speaking. That's ideal. Most people just want to learn recipes or formulas or they want to go by a pre-existing book. This was a problem I had in Japan when teaching; they wanted to know the program and what was expected of them so they could be evaluated and get good marks.

Obviously, the way I teach there's no such thing as a good mark. And the evaluation is really personal – your own feeling after you have been on this short voyage of creativity and discovery – how you feel and if it's given you a trampoline or a bridge into a deeper, more profound, more exciting, wider world for your own creative expression.

MR. ZAÑARTU: Is that why you were chosen to begin MADESA – the design school in South Africa [Cape Town]?

MS. HICKS: Probably. It was a project sponsored by UNESCO, and the truth of the matter is I was contacted by some South Africans who were eager to begin a school for people who had been deprived of formal education. They wanted them to be able to learn how to make things that they could market and live from – earning their livings. They said, "We don't have financing for this, but we have the idea. We have the building, the government, and many people are very enthusiastic and behind us," and so I introduced three dedicated young South Africans, who came up to Paris and slept in my living room in sleeping bags, to UNESCO and convinced them that this was a truly worthwhile project.

MR. ZAÑARTU: But tell me more about the way you were running the classes for people with no formal education or art training, but who wanted to earn their livings and find ways to express their creative energy. That's fascinating. That should be what every artist or craftsman wants to learn. Right?

MS. HICKS: You've hit the nail on the head, and that was the objective of the group in Cape Town: they were people who had come from townships and needed to develop skills. My way of teaching seemed appropriate to meet the challenge. Of course, we had to find the financing to make it possible, too.

When I presented the program to UNESCO they asked me, "What is going to be the approach, the supplies needed, and the short term and long term goals? Can you please give us the outline of what these classes will consist of, what materials you will need, what equipment you will need, and the whole budget?" I said, "We won't need anything. We won't need any equipment. We won't need any material. But we'll need to transport participants from their homes by bus to the place where we'll meet in the center of Cape Town - in the old customs house, which is an empty building. And we need to feed everyone."

"And the method of teaching will be: since we have nothing, what can we do? How can we find our way? How can we create by looking around us and seeing what people are throwing away or what exists in nature that we can recuperate and use to create things that will be so attractive that people cannot stand to live without them?"

MR. ZAÑARTU: Got to give me examples.

MS. HICKS: Things that will be functional, that everyone will absolutely need and cannot imagine what they did before they existed. You want concrete examples?

MR. ZAÑARTU: Yeah.

MS. HICKS: Storage units, protective cloths, separation panels, hanging devices, mats, stools, collapsible furniture, toys, clothing, jewelry, baskets, baby clothes. Materials we would use? We'd go out in the street. We wouldn't be garbage picking, but almost. We'd collect old newspapers and magazines that people were throwing away. We'd pick up packages and bits of string used to tie things together. We'd go around the moat of the fort and pull up the weeds and the roots that the gardeners were trying to eliminate. We'd go through the botanical garden and clean up the paths and collect fallen branches and fronds and use the stuff to make things.

Well, how would we make things? We would find a way to layer, attach, join, or weave them - things that people have done since time immemorial. Nature supplies raw materials. Then add the contemporary society, which is the great trash society: there's so much that's thrown away that can be recycled. Tin cans: cutting them in strips, weaving them, twisting them, knotting them, braiding them, nailing them. Crushing things that have no more use - broken plates, broken cups - using them as beads making holes in the fragments or finding ways to glue and make objects, to embed in cement, plaster, rubber, and form vessels out of them.

MR. ZAÑARTU: I love listening to you. It sounds very inspiring, but how does that relate to your personal work? Here's another question, which is: does the function of objects play a part in the meaning of your work? It seems like your Cape Town involvement is a very different approach from your personal art.

MS. HICKS: I don't think so. It's all research. Oiling the imagination. I am going to be 70 years old this year and it seemed to me I could spend time on my line of inquiry, and I could spend part of my time on what others need. Ever since I lived in Mexico, I made everything for my own house, whenever I could, functional and decorative. I've made my clothes since I was a child, and my children's clothes and my grandchildren's clothes. Sometimes I buy things and take them apart and remake them in a way I think I'd like them better. I even do that to art. I recycle my own art all the time - taking it apart and redoing it a different way.

MR. ZAÑARTU: Does your art have a function ever?

MS. HICKS: All of the wearables have function and all of the things I use in the household have a function. All the things that I - every soft thing in the house has a function.

MR. ZAÑARTU: I was trying to corner you into telling me what the function of your work or your artwork has - if it has a function, because of the endless discussion about art versus crafts. But I know your work has a function because you have brought it into architectural spaces where the role of the art piece has a strong meaning and is determined by or based on the function it should have in that space - in that architectural space. For instance, the pieces you've done in courthouses or in hospitals; can you talk to me about how you've approached -

MS. HICKS: From the perspective of function: I've made tapestries for the principal courtrooms in the Foley Square New York Federal Courthouse. They are tapestries, loosely speaking, but they're really heavy bas-reliefs in linen in very intense colors - abstract, of course. Abstract because when you know that a courtroom houses a jury and continual enactments of plays, you're not going to program people to look at birds or battle scenes or romantic landscapes. You have to respect neutrality and give them a clean mindspace. They can contemplate colors and give them meaning and interpretations for many days running, without being forced into a visual impasse with defined iconography.

So the function of these works is to act as a background and to accompany the theater of life, in a way - to enrich it and to give a fallback, almost secure, position for people who find themselves in frightening, traumatic situations.

For instance, one judge made me aware of a difficult trial of a woman who was condemned to prison by the jury, and when he asked her if she had anything she wanted to say she answered, "Your honor, can I approach the bench?" and he said "Yes" and he told me very faithfully that she said, "Can I touch that thing that's behind you on the wall? I've been looking at it for a long time and it's - it's given me company. I'd like to touch it." I thought that was one of the most powerful things I'd heard about a work having a function. And I was glad he took the trouble to tell me about this.

Hospitals are very important because the patient needs to be comforted, but the people accompanying the sick person need as much reassurance. The art that I practice, when crafted with love and care, communicates serenity to others in periods of difficulty; it has a function that is psychologically reinforcing.

MR. ZAÑARTU: That covers very well, then, the question about a sense of spirituality that's played a role in your art, and you're aware of that. How does - and I know you're very strong as a colorist - how do you approach your work when you know that it's going to be in a sensitive place like a hospital versus a restaurant in a loud New York City district? Does that affect your choices of colors - the way you want the vibration of the piece to -

MS. HICKS: I often focus on what kind of culture I am creating for. What is the context for the work? I don't mean simply what hospital or what restaurant, but is the hospital in Japan? In the countryside? Is the restaurant in a city like Rabat? In a five-star hotel? I've never made anything in a Moroccan restaurant, but I can try and imagine that kind of atmosphere. I discuss with the architect and the client or decorator and see what it is they're trying to achieve - [audio break, tape change] - and for what kind of clientele? What kind of people are expected to inhabit the space?

Sometimes I make things thinking of a certain public and then find out that that public is nonexistent or non-visual.

MR. ZAÑARTU: Doesn't react?

MS. HICKS: Doesn't react. Doesn't look at all. But then the dishwasher, the doorman or the waitress tell me how happy they are coming to work every day to be there with my installation. That's probably an important function - if it gives them a boost of some kind.

MR. ZAÑARTU: Has the market changed? I know you mentioned that you're approaching 70 and you have talked about how fragile the market for fiber arts has been in the past. Is there a market now for textile art, tapestry, fiber arts? Has it changed in your lifetime? Have you helped to influence or stimulate that market?

MS. HICKS: There are hills and valleys. There are periods of demand and periods of drought - as fashions come and go. Excuse me mentioning fashion in art and fashion in craft, but it's very strong. Attitudes change. All at once, someone decides that loft-living - steel and glass - are the only thing that's acceptable. One generation or two generations later the children who've been raised in those kinds of spaces say, "I have a ringing in my ears because from the time I was a child I was living in this metallic, clanging, reverberating place. I want to crawl into a felt igloo somewhere."

And others who've been living in the felt igloo say, "I'm suffocating. I've got serious claustrophobia. I don't want any more of this cocoon atmosphere. I long for empty space. To go to the ice hotel in Finland would be my ideal."

So you see swings - sensibilities swing, environments follow, attitudes and psychological needs develop and they usually develop differently in successive generations.

MR. ZAÑARTU: But you represent one of the leaders of fiber art: you practically created this movement of soft art.

MS. HICKS: I didn't create it alone, I joined it enthusiastically. I imagined it as an antidote to the sterile environment and hard materials in our buildings.

MR. ZAÑARTU: Some of your exhibits were called "Soft World" or "Soft Logic."

MS. HICKS: Yes, in Japan, in Korea, in Sweden -

MR. ZAÑARTU: And you always - in a very explicit way - talk about how it can help people to have soft elements in their lives. Let's hear your opinion about where we are now in the American society or the American market and what you imagine the future of soft art or fiber art to be.

MS. HICKS: Recently I've noticed that everyone wants a cushion - literally. A kind of a mascot; a kind of -

MR. ZAÑARTU: Blankey?

MS. HICKS: Blankey. I guess you might call it a blankey. There's a tremendous proliferation of cushions everywhere. That may be because of -

MR. ZAÑARTU: What does that have to do with your art?

MS. HICKS: With my art? [Laughter.]

MR. ZAÑARTU: With your art.

MS. HICKS: Quite a bit. I'll try and explain. I can't get over this. Besides cushions, there are loads of ethnographic cloth and colorful textile fragments. People are bringing plants into their environment in city living, not only country living - plants, fiber, and cloth cushions. And carpets folded up, piled like totem poles. Carpets that look like sculpture and that can be taken down and layered one on top of another to sit on, lie on, party on, relax, and meditate.

MR. ZAÑARTU: What does that have to do with art?

MS. HICKS: It's an expression of art. It's as though the nomadic existence comes back again - not wanting fixed things in fixed places, being able to transfer and change and alternate things in a space. Create forms. Every square foot and every square meter counts, so this flexible possibility of existence is compatible to, even dependent on, textile solutions. We're in a period where textile has become essential - even if it's only the size of a cushion.

MR. ZAÑARTU: I'm glad you brought this up because I've heard you talking about how we are living in smaller and smaller spaces in urban environments; hence nobody has the room for large paintings or sculptures anymore, but we have room for pliable, soft works that can be rolled and put away in a closet and rediscovered periodically. You mentioned the Japanese screens and scrolls that are changed every season and how your work may be used similarly. You hoped it would be the art of the future.

MS. HICKS: Not only the future; it's the art of now. Open a closet - anyone's closet - you'll see how sensitivity to texture has evolved. People have developed a stronger sense of texture and color these past ten years. You can see it in their clothes and their homes.

MR. ZAÑARTU: [Outside sounds.] These are the drums of the revolution we can hear in the background. We happen to be in the courtyard where [Jean Paul] Marat wrote his revolutionary newspaper [*Journal du Peuple*] that inspired the French Revolution, and once in a while we can hear the drums in the background.

MS. HICKS: And where Dr. Guillotin invented the guillotine, to do away neatly with the decadent society wearing luxurious, silk Lyonnais textiles.

MR. ZAÑARTU: Well, that brings me to the next logical question, which is, what are the particular qualities of your working environment? [Laughs.] Why are you working where you work now?

MS. HICKS: It's probably because when I moved to Paris [1964] and the artist I moved in with and married introduced me to this neighborhood. I grew to like it so it became my neighborhood. Paris is composed of many little districts - the sixième - the sixth arrondissement has become my quartier. My studio and living space are both in the same courtyard. That helps.

MR. ZAÑARTU: Do you think you would have made different art if you had lived in America instead of Mexico and France?

MS. HICKS: Yes. I'm pretty sure I would have. Probably I would have been teaching and been frustrated, or drawn more into the commercial circuit in America because I would have been reluctant to be marginal. I am stimulated by society. I do not draw away from or isolate myself from society. In the United States many craftsmen, in order to survive, have been obliged to pull out of the cities. The difficulties in finding studio space and to work peacefully would have propelled me to move to the countryside, my work might have reflected this.

I lived in the country in Mexico. Now I'm in the center of Paris by the Odeon subway station and all the movie theaters. I was lucky to find a quiet courtyard where I could be in the middle of the vibration of the city. I walk to a newspaper stand, read all the newspapers for half an hour, go and have a coffee at a café, watch people walking and see what they're wearing. I've become very much of a city person; the atmosphere and my studio and the things I make are intended for people who live in metropolises.

MR. ZAÑARTU: So would you say that a question like: where does America rank on an international scale in fiber arts does not apply because you evaluate it more as urban centers around the globe?

MS. HICKS: Yes.

MR. ZAÑARTU: More than national movements? I have understood that you see the planet as one family wearing textiles, using textiles, but is there a market that's clearly stronger and more defined in some countries or does that not apply to your field?

MS. HICKS: Yes, there's a very strong textile culture in Korea, in Japan, in Scandinavia, and in India. There's a strong sensibility here in France, too, because of the intense fashion and furnishing fabric activity. Both France and Italy have awareness of textile structures and textures and colors.

In New York, most of the things you see of a textile interest or a fiber art interest come from abroad rather than being made in the United States. There are very few strong galleries. I go to craft fairs or art fairs – once in a while – and look. Some dealers ask me, "Do you know anything that's beautiful, that's interesting, that's new, that we can sell?" Over the last 10 years, I suppose, I have tried to introduce artists and connect them with merchants. The merchants may not always be galleries; maybe they are shops, outlets – sales outlets. Sometimes it has worked out well.

MR. ZAÑARTU: Are there any significant writers in your field, or critics, that have helped try to open doors and bring interesting artists out in the open?

MS. HICKS: Mildred Constantine is the giant. A lot of the textile curators also overlap with decorative arts or with architecture and design. And people like Cara McCarty, who is at the St. Louis Art Museum, Lotus Stack at Minneapolis, and Matilda McQuaid, who is at Cooper Hewitt are good examples. I could name another 10 easily. Many museums stage exhibitions and are tuned into collecting, looking, and thinking about textiles in relation to other arts – decorative arts and design, not so much crafts, although it comes into the crafts area, too. There's where the line blurs.

I've lost touch with the Craft Museum that's become the Design Museum [Museum of Arts & Design] in New York. I hope to see where they're going and what they're doing. I know they are on a new tangent moving in a new way.

MR. ZAÑARTU: You were involved with them in the past at several –

MS. HICKS: At several different times.

MR. ZAÑARTU: Tell me, what are the similarities and the differences between your early work and your recent work. Curators change, directors of museums change, and museums change focus and evolve. What about you as an artist? When you look back on your career, what are the similarities and the differences from when you started?

MS. HICKS: To answer a question like that takes a good, long think.

MR. ZAÑARTU: I know you keep on making your miniatures, which are the same format, made with the same tools and with the same little, homemade loom that you used when you first explored weaving and textiles at Yale, then in Chile and Mexico. What's interesting is that you continue now in France with exactly the same format. That's wonderful. It's 50 years of continuity.

MS. HICKS: Well, it's like a page of paper. When you begin to learn to write, you are given a small cahier [notebook] to write in or a sheet of paper. In 50 years has the size of the sheet of paper we write on changed? Not very much. Not in Europe or America or other countries. Is it the post office that's telling us to always use a standard format? Postcards seem to be the same size – approximately – small variation. Anyway, when I chose this little format and began weaving it seemed limitless and I felt I could go on forever inventing within it. It is my page of inquiry – a window to the world.

When you paint, you tend to change formats – you paint on paper or you paint on canvas – but you take your inside, your interior, and you project it onto the format of that painting. It's what I've been doing on that small loom.

Now, another extension of my work is more like sculpture because I'm taking my discoveries, my ideas and walking them out into space like sculpture and making something that's inside me – color, shape, composition, texture – I'm making it exist, giving it a form and shape out in the world – exterior. Whereas on the small loom, I'm taking outside impressions, internalizing them, and formatting them in this one given size, which become very readable to me then like pages of a book.

But to answer your question, my basic concerns are constant. So I guess my work has not changed very much from the very beginning. I've been able to work on the small woven miniature and then on large sculpture projects in space, architecture, geography.

MR. ZAÑARTU: Are you seeing continuity or progression in your sense of color? Are your colors going to get completely wild and crazy as you lose your eyesight, like Matisse, or have you had a very stable palette throughout your life?

MS. HICKS: Well, if I look at my miniatures, I can tell you where they were made. This was when I was in India. This was when I was in Morocco. Or, I know this was made when I was on an island up in Brittany looking at the lighthouses at night. The colors are the keys. My palette is influenced by light, geography -

MR. ZAÑARTU: Tell me more about the choices?

MS. HICKS: Color. Number one, colors - and then the textures and the shapes, but mostly the color and the texture. In fact, every idea - every idea I have starts with texture and color, and they are inextricable. I do not see color without texture and I do not see texture without color. My dreams are an explosion of color.

MR. ZAÑARTU: So, Sheila, tell me where you get your ideas for your work?

MS. HICKS: Earlier - if you'd asked me that question earlier - a few years ago - I'd probably say from traveling and looking and exchanging ideas with other artists and going to exhibitions and museums, but now, I get ideas for my work just by doing the work - quietly picking up some material, thinking about it, and leaving it around somewhere, and then introducing it into the universe that I have created for myself here in my studio and home.

I can see where artists get to a point where it's painful to separate from their workplace. I mean, if you've ever visited Brancusi's studio - the recreation of it at the Centre Pompidou - you can see what I mean. The studio is an oasis of works-in-progress. You may have three oranges and sit and look at those three oranges for weeks on end with different light, adding a textile fragment or a grape - just looking at it.

It's what happens to me here with yarns - tautly spun wool all shriveled up - perched on top of a green Swedish glass bottle; I've been watching it all week and that's where I get an idea for a work. Intense light shines on at certain times of the day and it casts shadows.

The other place I get ideas for my work is in the daily newspapers - practically every photograph in the newspaper includes textiles. I don't know if you realize it, but all of the terrible tragedies that have been photographed and documented - Gypsy migrations where textiles are on the move, refugee camps, Palestinian enclaves, Afghan warriors, veiled women in flowing cloth - all textiles. I cut these photographs out of the newspapers and paste them in my work books.

MR. ZAÑARTU: And yet your work is peaceful, comforting and spiritually uplifting. None of your work deals with violence, aggression, deterioration, destroyed textiles. You're not an artist that's expressing anger or anguish through textile.

MS. HICKS: You know, you express by the opposite - by reaction to things. You don't always express by imitating or by following the example of. Sometimes you express by the contrast, the refusal, the fear, and the outrage that you feel to certain things. We're bombarded by images. I live in a city where information exchange is intense. I take in a lot of information. I assimilate it; I react to it in my own way. And -

MR. ZAÑARTU: Searching for peace?

MS. HICKS: Well, in my work I know I'm reacting. I am creating but I am also reacting. For instance, contrast this very soft cloth on the table, and touching it, and then going to dinner with some friends at a noisy restaurant, with a cacophonous acoustical bombardment. Tension develops between the people who are serving and the people who are demanding to be served. And all of this conflict causes me to draw back into a sort of peaceful textile story.

Don't laugh: the most banal example just to show you daily life and my creative impulse for work ideas.

MR. ZAÑARTU: We've talked about the Rothko Chapel a place where you can find a dialogue with the art on the walls that's a spiritual experience. Tell me if you're aware that your work does the same - that that's how I feel when I see your work. Is that something you are conscious of and that you know you are working with?

MS. HICKS: I'm striving. I'll never reach it, but it's certainly worth striving for. I don't sign anything I make. I don't write my name on my work. I make it and then it must live on its own. That's what I'm striving for: something that can be contemplated, meditated - that can become part of our existence - peaceful coexistence: something that somehow envelopes you in good oxygen.

MR. ZAÑARTU: We're talking about creating a space that's a peaceful space - that has good vibrations. I mentioned the Rothko Chapel in Houston. Has it ever crossed your mind that the ultimate challenge would be to have either a client or a sponsor that would give you four walls - an entire room - to work in as an artist?

MS. HICKS: The Rothko Chapel and a few other spaces have been inspirational to me. First question that comes to mind is: do I need to have four walls on which to hang something, or can I create a space that you can enter and be in that's not necessarily hard, constructed architecture? One that is a soft, pliable, fluid, textural, color ambience that you can enter, but is not necessarily architecture? Could I say architecture that is nomadic? That can be erected and collapsed? One that can be stored and then inflated or stretched?

MR. ZAÑARTU: We're back in the soft world.

MS. HICKS: We're back in ancient times where there were caves and where there were provisional, temporary, environments. In other words, an environment doesn't necessarily mean that you walk into an architected space and then hang a painting on the wall. Think more basically of just creating the space yourself, or let's say start thinking along these lines. Of course, I have been thinking along these lines for a long time. I'll just keep thinking along these lines. Maybe we'll both be surprised to see what happens.

MR. ZAÑARTU: Sheila, you've talked about many things and you've had a very rich life and you're interested in many things. Tell me what your - the way you work or simply what is a typical day. If you opened your agenda, tell me what would be in it this week, for instance.

MS. HICKS: March 15, Monday. Open the studio at a quarter to nine. Select the colors for the third of three panels that I'm making for a big architecture project here in Paris at La Defense. Establish the colors so that my two assistants can proceed without me, so I can go upstairs where there's good light in the greenhouse - and work alone on some miniatures. By 3:00 I'll go back into the studio: a teacher will be bringing her most talented student over to see me. She wants me to talk to her, look at her portfolio, and give her ideas or criticism for her final project - which she has to present next month.

MR. ZAÑARTU: Which school?

MS. HICKS: It's called Duperré [école Supérieure des arts appliqués]. I'm glad she's coming because that helped me to cancel an appointment with the accountant who is pressing me to make my tax declaration.

Next day, 16th, I'll spend all day in my studio. I keep the studio open till 6:00, when my assistants usually walk out the door. Then I catch up on e-mail messages and outside communications, which I tend to ignore. Plus fit in a short appointment to the dentist and meet six friends in a Mexican restaurant, where we drink ourselves under the table - [laughter] - and celebrate that one of these friends is getting the [Robert] Capa ICP [International Center for Photography] Award for the best - I don't know, for lifetime achievement in photography.

MR. ZAÑARTU: Who is the friend?

MS. HICKS: Josef Koudelka. Czech. He's a good friend. In fact, I'll probably fly over for the ceremony. He wants me to be at the table with him.

MR. ZAÑARTU: Are you in contact with a lot of artist friends here in Paris?

MS. HICKS: A few. I have few, but close friends who come and go - itinerant a bit, but who have their studios here in Paris. We get together when they're in and out, catching up on things. Like Dani Karavan, who just called from Japan. "Where is the project you are supposed to send for the exhibition?" - a kind of traveling show in Japan. He's calling me from his hotel because he's meeting with the agents and they want to know what I'm doing - if I'm getting this plan together, or not. This is very high on my priorities.

MR. ZAÑARTU: Because you have the same agent?

MS. HICKS: Right. I mean, there are a few people who help, but I don't have any one that I work with exclusively or continually. I can't put my head in a vise. I have very irregular patterns of thinking and living and working. I've got to keep my liberty. And people tend to press or want you to key into their rhythms, their deadlines. It's hard but necessary, to keep going.

MR. ZAÑARTU: Are you more creative in the morning or in the afternoon? [François] Truffaut, the French filmmaker, said he was a producer in the morning and a poet in the afternoon. Do you feel rhythms like that?

MS. HICKS: My creative spurts are not programmable or predictable. In the morning I am tuned into accomplishing something, by the afternoon I am a free spirit dreaming and at night I sift through my ideas. I try to clean up my desk in the morning, all of my photo archives and letters and documents. When I walk away from them I hope others can use and make some sense out of them. It's tedious - a real pain in the neck.

I am about to go to dinner with two friends at the restaurant around the corner: canard aux olives - duck with olives, which I adore.

MR. ZAÑARTU: So you don't go to see art shows? Do you go to galleries? Museum shows? Is it part of your weekly agenda?

MS. HICKS: Sure. Next week there's a Miró show at the Centre Pompidou, a Schiaparelli opening at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs. The Cluny Museum will open a new textile salle. I'll go to each for an hour, meet friends, look, and go to the Centre Photographique and see Marc Riboud's retrospective show. Usually I miss the openings and catch shows the day before they close.

MR. ZAÑARTU: So it's all over the place, photography, fashion, painting, but with textiles and fiber being your primary daily -

MS. HICKS: My consuming involvement.

MR. ZAÑARTU: And your personal life? Your family life? It's quite full too. How does it interface with your professional life?

MS. HICKS: I am working every day, so I just bail out once in a while, but that's my - it's - I work every day. My professional, personal, and private life all meld together. This month I'm learning how to scan images of my work, so Bastian [van den Berg] will come over and help me tomorrow.

MR. ZAÑARTU: That's the Dutch photographer you're working with photographing and scanning your miniatures and you were very excited because the quality of the photography and the scans felt like three-dimensional photography. They render the texture and the quality of the weaving in a remarkable way, and I remember you saying that now that that was done you felt like it was okay if you were hit by a bus: you were leaving something behind. I was surprised because we were talking about photos, not the actual weavings. How can that be?

MS. HICKS: Only a handful of people will ever see the actual weavings, but if I have excellent images of them - photographs that are carefully and convincingly done I can share them with more people: with schools and students and others who are curious. It's more democratic, you know, to spread it and show the work authentically recorded. If you think about how many people can see original paintings or original sculptures, there are very few in the world. And with Internet and publishing, our thinking has evolved more along the line of sharing.

MR. ZAÑARTU: On that train of thought, what do you hope to share with future generations of - [audio break].

This is Cristobal Zañartu interviewing Sheila Hicks at her home in Paris, France, on March 18th, 2004. And this is disc two of our session.

We were interrupted by the end of the disc as I was asking a question, which was in the train of thought of using technology to share your work with others. What is it that you're trying to share or what is it that you want to leave behind, Sheila?

MS. HICKS: Today, you're asking me difficult questions and sometimes I think I'm giving flip or superficial answers, and I don't know how to answer a heavy question like that without sounding as though I'm taking myself very seriously, perhaps too seriously, or without sounding a bit light-footed. I'm going to try and find a tone and a spirit in between the two.

Please remember - I said try because I may not necessarily find it.

MR. ZAÑARTU: Try.

MS. HICKS: We each have one life to live. I've often said that being a woman has not been a disadvantage. I've never said it's been an advantage. Take that as the middle road. I think that as a woman I've walked an individualistic path and suffered and enjoyed the consequences of my choices - [audio break, tape change] -I'd like to share my creative journey with men and women and especially young men and young women. I would like my work to be a voice of encouragement documented by material culture - by showing things I have made along the way. My path and my somewhat unusual journey have been full of surprises.

I've moved about and lived in different countries. I made friends from many cultures and professions. Along the way I made drawings, sketches, and weavings that developed into larger works. What I would like to communicate is that I took the journey, and that I learned how to use the wind in order to sail. Not always going against the wind, but rather finding and embracing other cultures, and trying to satisfy the needs of our society while trying to express myself, and also to contribute to our common culture.

The adventure may be apparent. I'd like to communicate the poetic dimension of it and the degree of difficulty in working in an open-ended way.

I hope to inspire others to move along a creative pursuit. Probably that's the long and the short of what I'd like to communicate. Art has been my life, and is my life, and making art through craft. I am a dedicated participant in the engaging arena of crafting art. The excitement of day to day involvement is simply indescribable.

MR. ZAÑARTU: It's quite intense listening to you. You speak poetically and you're talking about sharing things in a more spiritual way – in a poetic way, but concretely for somebody studying textiles or art, do you feel you brought a stone to the edifice? Do you feel you're leaving something behind as a craftswoman? Do you care? Is it the least of your concerns?

MS. HICKS: It's not the least of my concerns. Time is running out, it is more and more important to me to work – to make things of material, concrete nature. I've speculated so much. I've tried so many things. I would like to draw some conclusions about the territories I've delved into: tapestry, sculpture, weaving, and environmental art.

It has nothing to do with size or volume; it has more to do with ideas, concepts, observations, and knowledge.

MR. ZAÑARTU: Yet you are making more and more monumental works. What's the size of the last commission you completed for Minneapolis?

MS. HICKS: It's 20 meters – no, 20 feet high (about seven meters) and 60 feet wide. It's big. It's not only the size, it's the impact and the presence that it has and the validity of craftsmanship. It's not a throwaway. Slowly it'll disintegrate but meanwhile it's meant as theater – where presentations are short-lived and meant as a –

MR. ZAÑARTU: Poetic gesture?

MS. HICKS: Poetic presence. Strong. It is a work made out of linen and cork for a company called Target. But back to concluding remarks: I'm fortunate to have good health and be surrounded by a supportive family: husband, children, and grandchildren. This counts a lot. I haven't drifted into the tunnel of desperation or physical exhaustion that hits some artists my age.

MR. ZAÑARTU: In the past have you gone through dry spells? You've always been extremely prolific.

MS. HICKS: Strangely enough, some of my blackest periods served as fuel to make me work harder. I don't know if it happens to others, but it happens to me. In my most conflicted and difficult moments, my thoughts and my energy and my concentration turn to work. I produce and move along lines that I might not have found if I'd been in a rose garden for years on end. I wake up when a fire alarm is sounded. I bail when the boat is sinking and scan the horizon for land.

MR. ZAÑARTU: How do you remember? What causes your work to progress? Do you have notebooks filled with ideas or is it something that really just evolves and happens day by day?

MS. HICKS: For the past few months I've collected and sorted out all of my notebooks, sketchbooks, and agendas and lined them up in one row from beginning to end. It was strange. It was like a reptile that shed its skin and then found it had a new skin. I took an imaginary X-ray of the vertebrae – of all the different chapters of my work and my life. I started with the year 1954 and chronologically put the assemblage on one shelf. The books are all different sizes and colors.

MR. ZAÑARTU: And they are all covered in textiles. That's why you were saying they were shedding their skins, because they are physically beautiful objects with aged fabrics – books you were carrying in your backpack in South America or Japan or India, filled with ideas.

MS. HICKS: Usually they are piled up like totem poles around the studio and the house. It's amazing to see them together side by side; I'm going to dive back into them.

Then again trying to make some sense out of them may be useless, but I think it's worth a try to re-phrase some of the early observations in a more constructed and intense way.

MR. ZAÑARTU: We're talking about notebooks full of ideas and something comes to mind: you have assistants that have worked with you for more than 30 years and I've witnessed you trying to have your assistants develop a piece and it never looks like a Sheila Hicks. Your eye has to be involved even when on paper, everything is described: size, material. And I'm wondering – will it be impossible – even if somebody wanted to use some of your notebooks, to make Sheila Hickses without you? Why is that? It seems like it should be possible, but explain to me why it is not.

MS. HICKS: I wish I knew. It's simple, yet it's subtly complicated. If I'd been able to solve this, I could have been much more productive and I wouldn't have had to recycle so many of my works. When I made something and felt confident about it and wanted to make version two and do it even better, it became lifeless. Version two was

worse than version one and version three was even worse than –

Maybe one answer to the question is that the author editing his manuscript understands the unwritten part as well as the written part; the *non dit* [unspoken] – the unsaid. What is not going into it is as important as what is going into it. Anyone who is interpreting work takes it literally, and even if he is the best craftsman in the world, he will do it his way. What you have purposely not done, the tension of barely averted errors, mistakes, hesitations, decision-making isn't there. Work in the hands of well-meaning but detached fabricators can become cold and dead.

MR. ZAÑARTU: What impact has technology had on your thinking and work? We could say that no modern technology is of any help to make your personal work while you're at a restaurant with friends, right? But some of your designs are being produced while you dine or sleep.

MS. HICKS: Can we divide the production in two? One is the artist looking, searching. The second is the defined prototype the artist authorizes for reproduction, which goes into design. I did this when I was designing textiles in India, and they became more assertive, defined, clean, well-made as a product. When you see the prototype and compare trials, the original research, they have another charm: they have a validity that is authentic. Then you determine what is meant to be reproduced; that's the way of working. I've had experiences in doing that, but what I don't like in my own studio is to do something that is a unique one-of-a-kind work of – I don't know. Do I call it art? A work. I don't like to create it and it starts to look cold, methodical, and dies on the vine. Too perfectly designed.

If I see it happening, I mess it up. I give it an electric charge of energy with my own kind of struggle and doubt and resolution.

MR. ZAÑARTU: There was a time when you were trying to use mechanical tools to help relieve the manual labor of wrapping cords, or you were inventing and having colleagues invent machines for you, but they're not in your studio anymore. It really looks like the more time advances, the less tools you have in your studio: a couple of needles and a couple of clamps.

MS. HICKS: We still have scissors. We don't – nobody's biting the thread to cut it. [Laughter.] But a lot of the tools we were trying to invent and perfect are on the shelf in the storage room in the back.

MR. ZAÑARTU: Right. Gathering dust.

MS. HICKS: They're dinosaurs. They're interesting. They'll go into some art and *métier* [trade] museum. How'd the first jacquard loom come into being? How'd this thinking mature into computers?

Someone may find one of these inventions or bricolage kind of devices that we have been working on interesting for some future technology. We may get to the moon with one of these spinners.

MR. ZAÑARTU: Do you ever have crafts journalists and writers coming to ask for technical advice and –

MS. HICKS: Recipes?

MR. ZAÑARTU: Yeah, recipes.

MS. HICKS: Yes, and I do my best to give them information about whatever I have: yarns, tools, how I tie knots –

MR. ZAÑARTU: You don't hide your secrets?

MS. HICKS: No, I give them. Everything I have is in full evidence at all times – the way I work. I'm not trying to be the mad scientist who is patenting my ideas behind the veil of mystery.

MR. ZAÑARTU: You've told me you actually think it's quite flattering when others imitate your work. Sometimes it's quite pathetic to see how closely and how badly imitated it is, but you take it as a compliment – that people are trying to approach –

MS. HICKS: Well, if someone likes something they're going to try and do it, and it's the same in theater, the same in ballet, the same in music, the same in everything. If you're never emulated, I mean, get lost.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

Last updated... *January 25, 2005*