

MODERN ICELANDIC TAPESTRY

The Works of Ásgerður Búadóttir

BY KURT ZIER

A traveller who is paying only a fleeting visit to Iceland and does not find there the variety of things that he has perhaps encountered in other Nordic countries should not, nevertheless, jump to conclusions. This is particularly the case with regard to tapestry, which in Scandinavia is a flourishing art. In Iceland, however, it has only very recently begun to develop. There are cogent reasons for this that must be realized if we are to understand why such an artistically inclined nation as the Icelanders should in many fields of art and modern crafts be still only in the first stages of development. Reduced to one sentence they are that the fight for bare existence in this northern island was for centuries so hard that it consumed practically all the energies of the people. It is true that the artistic activities and craftsmanship derived from the old Icelandic homes and domestic culture, such as wood-car-

ving, silver-work and weaving, have been preserved up to the present time. But all these artistic activities were limited to the transitory Icelandic turf house and turf church. Although there was a domestic culture in Iceland, there was a lack of architecture — the mother of all arts — in the true sense. There were no castles, stately homes, manors, cathedrals, civic halls, patrician houses and consequently no need or opportunity for the emergence of any great decorative art.

CLEAR AND SIMPLE FORMS

The appearance of the new architecture, however, stimulated at the same time the graphic arts: painting, glass windows, mosaic, sculpture and, last but not least, tapestry. Iceland has entered the modern world at a breakneck pace during the last 30 years. The old turf house has given way to one built of reinforced concrete,

the evening reading of the sagas to television. The people have, so to speak, changed over in one leap from the oldest mode of transportation in Iceland, the horse, to the airplane. And this applies to all aspects of life. All the intermediate stages have been bypassed. There is in Iceland an incredibly abrupt and sharp contrast between the old and the modern times. It is not only that the old folk art is vanishing, but also that at the same time the country is being inundated with the industrial products of the whole outside world, in a most bewildering fashion. This sudden and menacing onslaught on all traditions has necessitated a thorough reappraisal of the old ways and customs. This has been accompanied by a realization that a simple resuscitation or even imitation of the old folklore is not possible. A feeling of renewed contact in the field of arts and crafts must penetrate sufficiently deep into the con-

ÁSGERÐUR BÚADÓTTIR

studied art at the Icelandic State School of Arts and Crafts, and later at the Royal Academy in Copenhagen from 1947 to 1949.

In addition to three private showings of tapestries in Reykjavík, she has taken part in various exhibitions abroad, such as:

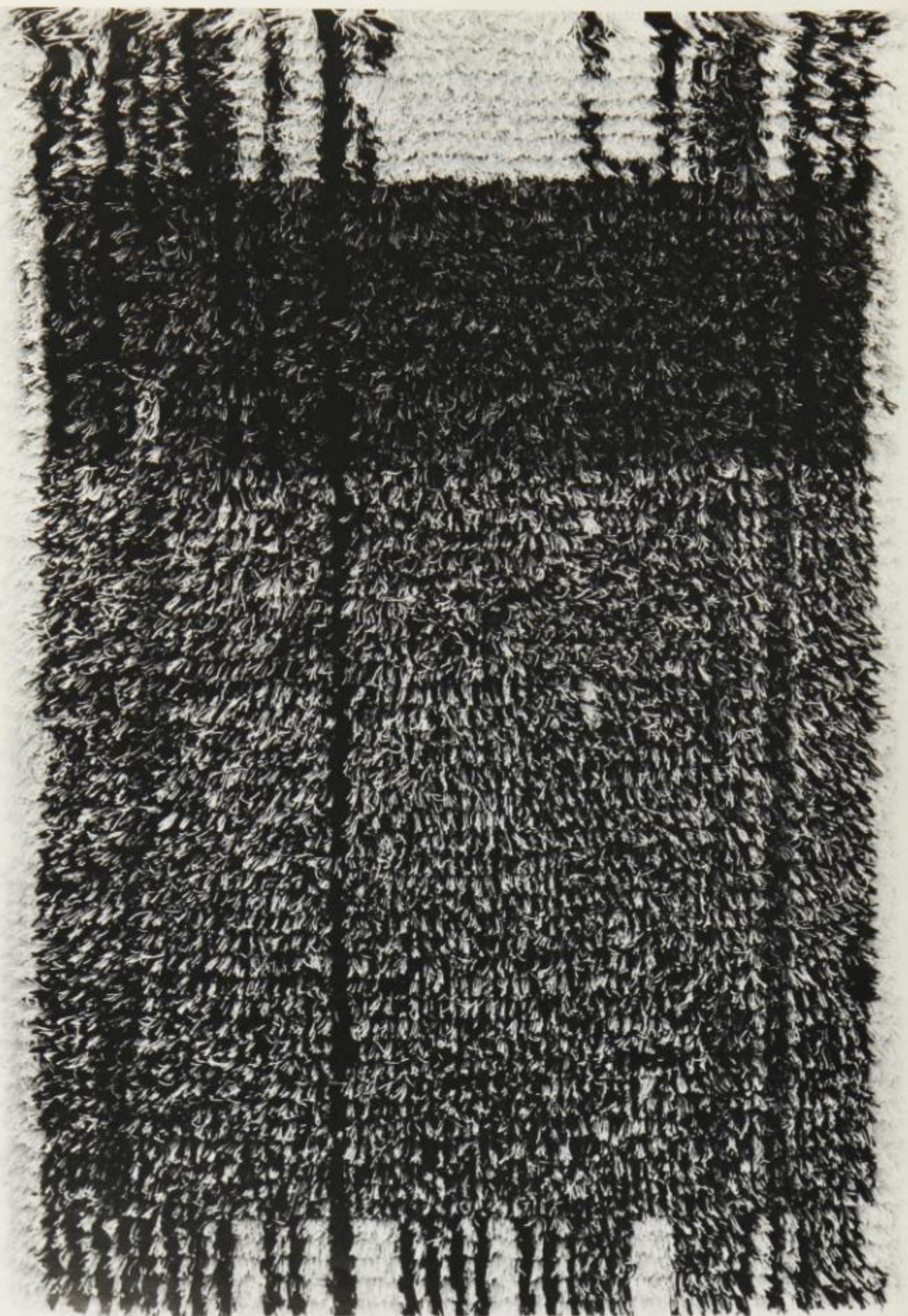
the international art exhibition in Munich in 1956 and 1957, at the first of which she was awarded the gold medal for a woven wall-hanging,

the Nordic Art Society exhibition in Gothenburg in 1957, the Nordic art exhibition at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris in 1959,

and she has also displayed her work at exhibitions of other Icelandic artists in Reykjavík.

Ásgerður Búadóttir lives in Reykjavík, where she does her art work.





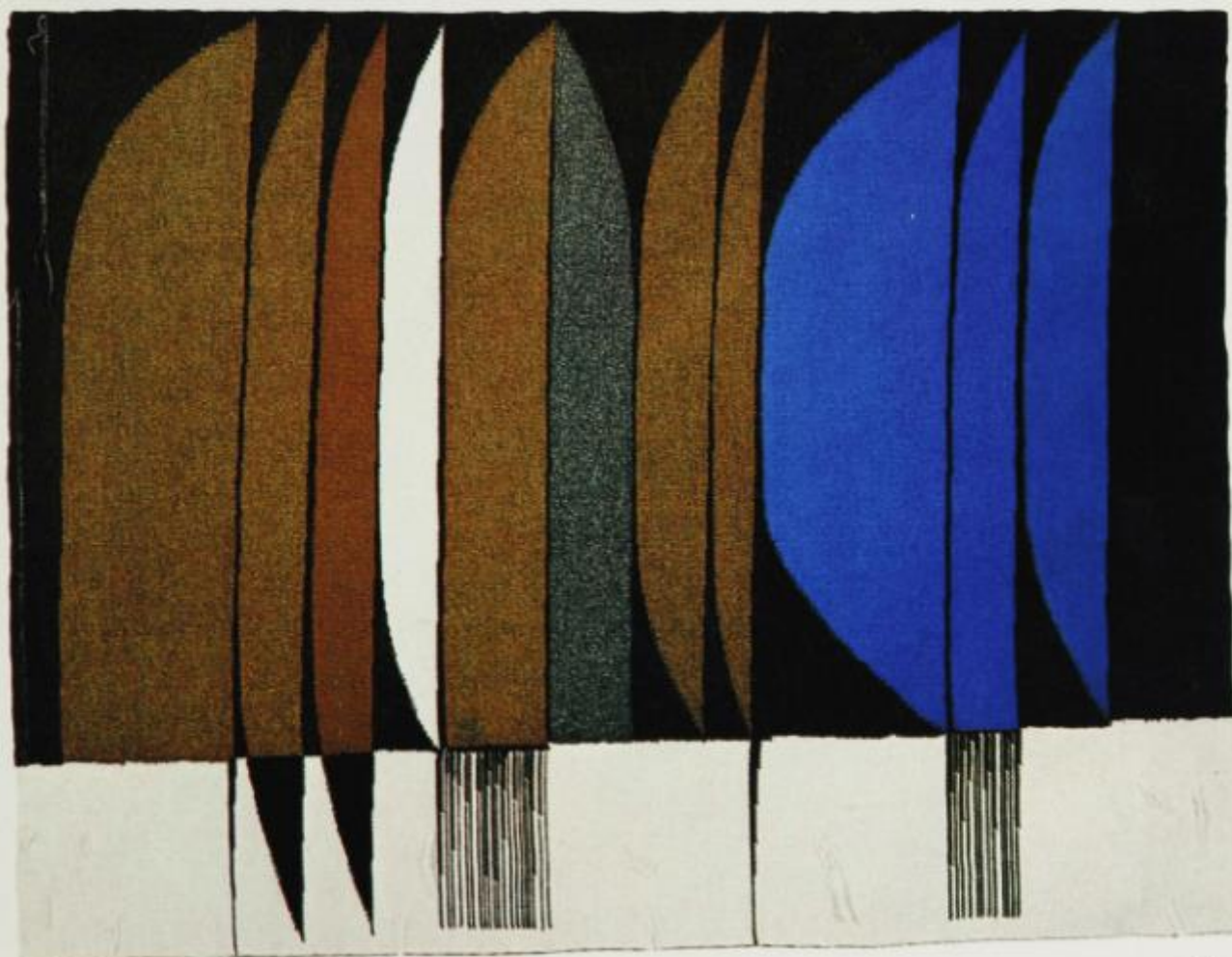
Three wall hangings by Asgerdur
Búadóttir

Right: The Month of May,
wool and horse-hair
Size 98 x 73 cm

Below:
Cerenity, wool, Size 118 x 154 cm.
Opposite: Snow and Earth, wool in
natural colours, grey, white and black.
Size 156 x 104 cm.

sciousness. There must be a true understanding of aim and function of the new production in the Icelandic home, of the changed way of life of the Icclander, and of the nature of the material so that a new, genuine form can be created. This applies especially to tapestry, which has always really been an essential part of architecture. Asgerdur Búadóttir, whom we are here introducing, is a representative of this new artistic trend. Her work has already attracted attention abroad. For instance, she was in 1956 awarded a gold medal by the province of Bavaria at the Munich Fair.

After studying art in Reykjavik and Copenhagen, Asgerdur at first still remained under the influence of the "picture". However, she very soon came to a realization of the essence of tapestry, and she did not succumb to the temptation of seeking quick, superficial recognition by imitating old Icelandic folklore. Trained in the purism of





Wall hanging,
wool, black,
grey and blue
Size 197 x 120 cm

abstract art, she uses clear and simple forms in her carpets and wall-hangings. In this way she demonstrates that it is particularly in the wonderful material, wool, that the genuine, abstract decorative art finds its full expression. This association between weaving and modern art is incidentally by no means fortuitous. No less a person than Paul Klee taught weaving classes in the famous *Bauhaus* in Germany.

Ásgerdur Þúadóttir is advancing step by step along this path. For a realization of the function of the wall-hanging it must also be understood that the modern Icelandic home is adorned by art and paintings of every type, as well as being furnished with wood and other materials and decorative, industrial textiles. For this reason Ásgerdur concentrates on making her wall-hangings rather a focus of rest and inner harmony. By economy of colour and form she thus makes the wall a soothing background to the life of men, who wish to recover in their own homes from the nerve-racking noise and bustle of the working day. Ásgerdur's creations are rhythmically inspired by a *géometrie humaine* of forms. The presence of the living human being in front of them is from the start intended as a contrast. It is only by a combination of the whole — man, architecture, tapestry — that he fulfills his function. Finally, there is a third factor to be considered. That is the raw material. In this respect Iceland, as a sheep-rearing country, is particularly favoured. The old techniques of wool processing and dyeing are also still very much alive. They are now being expanded by industrial processing. Ásgerdur Þúadóttir reveals in her tapestries a fine feeling for the qualities of this material, wool, and she incorporates them as calculated elements in her compositions. She often limits her colour selections to the available natural colours of the sheep. She uses alternately the old *rya* technique and the tapestry weaving which she ingeniously varies according to her artistic inclinations. So much for Ásgerdur Þúadóttir's weaving. Compared with the great example of Norway, where through unbroken tradition and particularly because of the need for large, representative, temporal or ecclesiastical rooms, the European gobelin art has achieved its highest development, Ásgerdur's work is only a beginning. A new beginning, which is however extremely promising because it correctly appreciates the artistic and sociological functions on which the development of this branch of art depends. There is no doubt that the rapidly developing architecture will create new and wider opportunities also for the Icelandic textile art and will present the latter with bigger challenges.