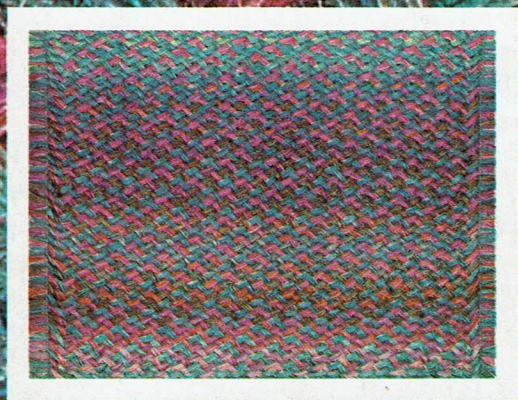


THE MAGAZINE OF TEXTILES

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# FIBERARTS

FIBER  
FROM  
AROUND  
THE  
WORLD



*featuring*

A  
CANADIAN  
PORTFOLIO



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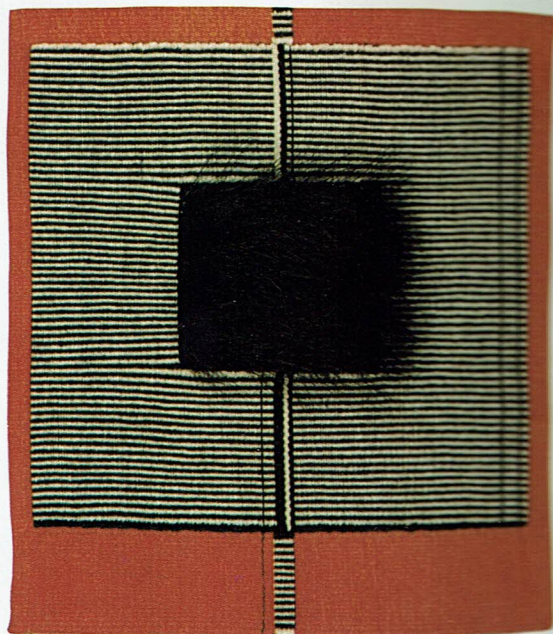
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*Asgerdur Buadottir. Variation III, 1981; wool and horsehair, 25 by 22 inches. Page 68.*

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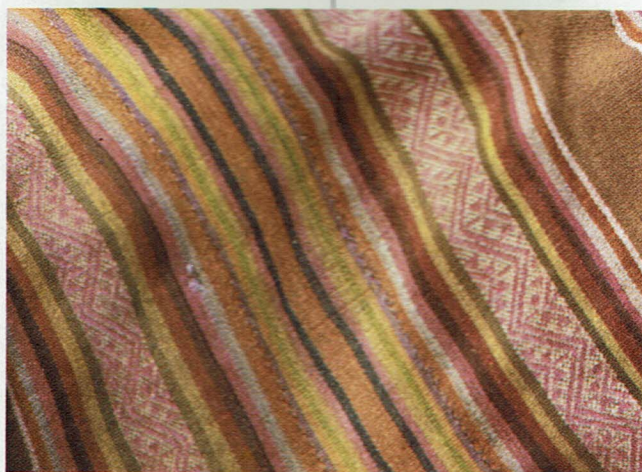
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*Cover: Karen Chapnick. Out of the Mist, 1982; 44½ by 61 inches, with detail. Page 29.*

*Below: left, weavers in the village of Viqueen, Peru. Right, detail of manta from Pitamarca. Photos: Lin Fife. Page 60.*





# FIBER ART IN ICELAND

Rather than thinking of themselves as isolated in the North Atlantic, Icelandic fiber artists feel they are centrally located. Most have studied and traveled outside the country and all keep open a window to the rest of the world.

By Hrafnhildur Schram

Iceland has a rich history of textile making for practical use. Blankets and warm outer clothing—the traditional Icelandic sweater is perhaps the most well-known—are a necessity for long, dark Icelandic winters and even for long summer nights when the temperature remains cool.

Tapestry weaving was practiced, but only to a limited extent. It was done on the warp-weighted loom, an archetypal upright frame with freely suspended warps held taut by a weighted bar. The warp-weighted loom was brought to the island by Nordic settlers in the ninth century and used for 1,000 years. Last century it was replaced by the familiar foot-powered loom.

Unlike textile artists in countries with a history of creative textile expression, our modern textile artists are perhaps freer and more open to ideas. Says one, "For better or worse, we have to create the tradition."

The pioneers in modern Icelandic textiles—Juliana Sveinsdottir (1889-1966), Barbara Arnason (1911-1975) and Vigdis Kristjansdottir (1904-1981)—each started out with an academic art education. They often methodically followed the laws of painting, their shared background, rather than basing their weaving on vertical and horizontal elements.

Today Icelandic textile artists vigorously assert the independence of textile arts from other artistic media. They approach their medium freely, working from rough sketches to let the picture grow spontaneously out of the weaving. During the last 10 years, Icelandic textile art has blossomed, developing a variety that is exciting to follow and record. Now more and more artists are turning to this

new art medium of fiber, thread and textile-based constructions.

Asgerdur Buadottir spans the gap between the textile pioneers and the current crop of textile artists. A gentle woman in her sixties, Asgerdur studied painting in the late 1940s, first in Iceland and then at the Royal Academy in Copenhagen. She began weaving after a two-week course. Asgerdur says that the lack of formal weaving theory and technique was for her the "best way"; without it she was free to develop a personal style as much influenced by painting and drawing as by the laws of the loom.

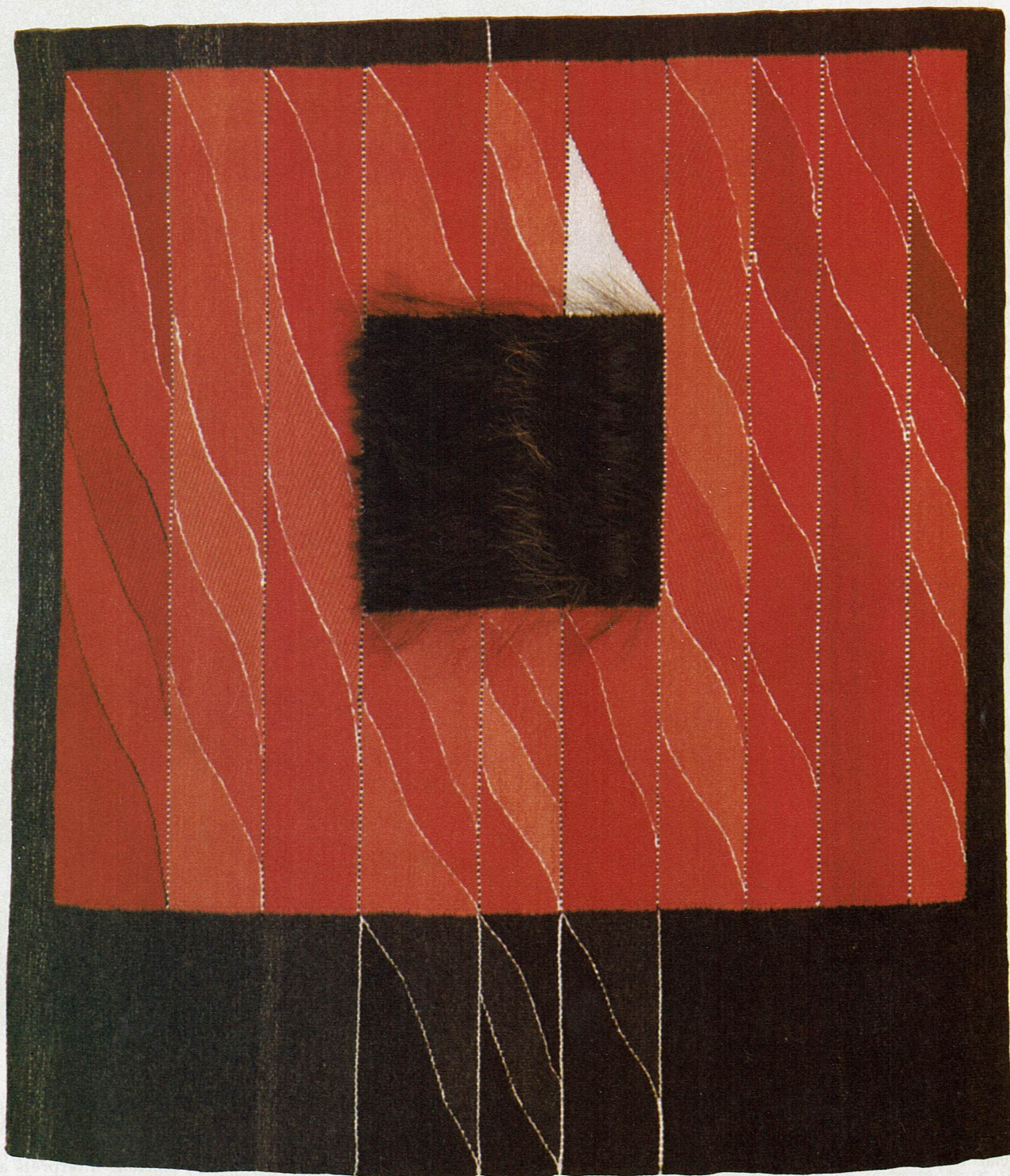
The linear elements and soft horsehair shapes in Asgerdur's work suggest drawing—perhaps charcoal on paper—a graphic quality reinforced by the use of contrasting dark/light yarns in each composition. Yet one would make no mistake that these are tapestries. Color gradations are achieved by hand dyeing and the overall softness could be achieved only by the painstaking laying in of the weft, section by section, row by row.

Although she uses a linen warp, Asgerdur is committed to the use of native materials. The weft is Icelandic wool; the horsehair is pulled from tails she gets from a slaughterhouse.

A generation older than her contemporaries in textiles, Asgerdur has exhibited widely—throughout Iceland and in Stockholm, Copenhagen, Paris and Toronto—and received recognition for her work. "Little by little," she says, "people remember your name."

Until recently Asgerdur and other textile artists had no organization of their own. In 1975 the **Icelandic Textile Guild** (*Textilfelagid*) was established by students and teachers



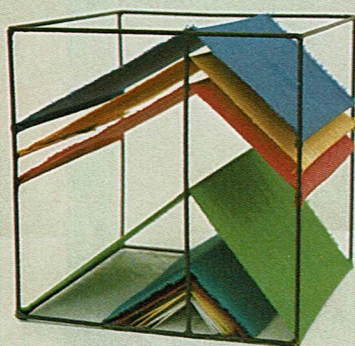
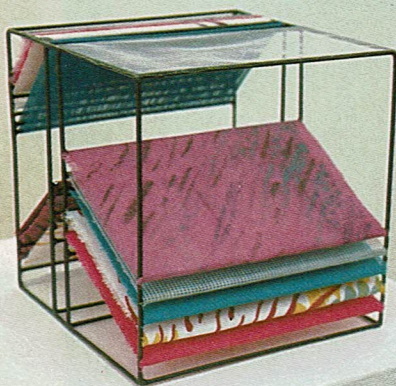


Sea of Fire, 1981; 51 by 44 inches.

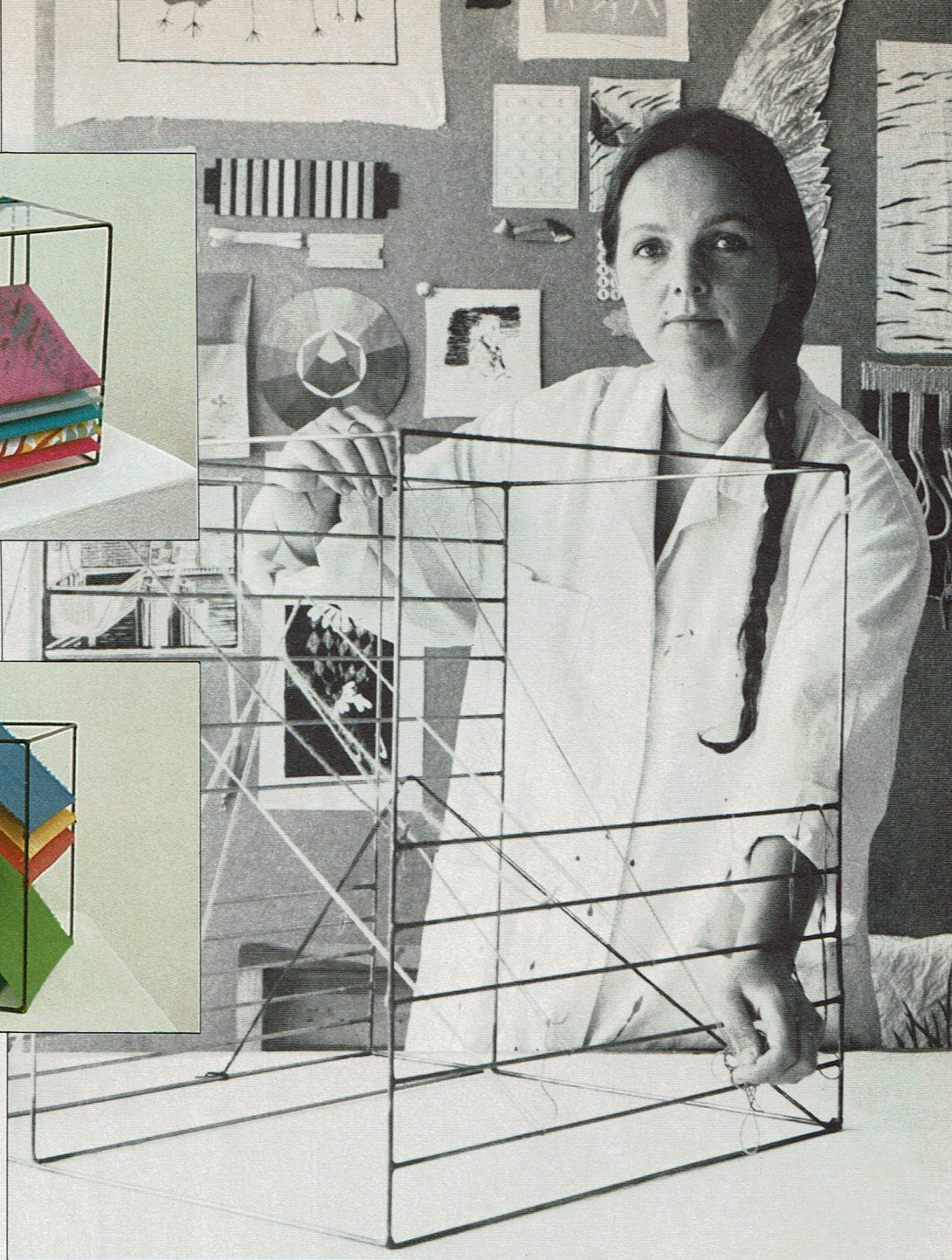


Asgerdur Buadottir





*Above, two untitled compositions, 1982; both are metal and cloth constructions of mixed printing techniques, 14 by 14 inches.*



*Asrun Kristjansdottir*

at the Icelandic College of Arts and Crafts. Its aim is to represent Icelandic textile artists at home and abroad and to improve their working condition as well as to provide a social network for its members. Today there are 35 members of the guild. Most of them live in or near the capital of Reykjavik, some working in their own workshops, others sharing studio space.

The guild is now a full member of the Nordic Textile Triennial and has a considerable influence in Iceland, where it has produced two important collective exhibitions of its members' works. Earlier this year the guild sponsored an exhibition of Icelandic textile miniatures that opened and will be traveling with the main Triennial throughout the Scandinavian countries.

**Sigríður Johannsdóttir** is one of the members of the Textile Guild. She works in close association with her long-time companion and husband, **Leifur Breiðfjörð**, Iceland's most talented (and its only full-time) glass artist. Their collaboration in textiles started in 1978, "a natural develop-

ment after working together in glass for 11 years," says Sigríður, who has been assisting Leifur with the leading of the glass.

Leifur makes the sketches that Sigríður interprets and executes on the loom. They work abstractly. Interestingly, despite the long tradition of abstraction in Icelandic utilitarian weaving, it is rarely used by the textile artists. "Our textiles have been inspired by our glass works," they say. "These two media have much in common, such as the long preparation work and the fact that after the piece is finished nothing can be changed." Leifur has insisted on taking weaving lessons from Sigríður to better understand the nature and laws of the textile medium.

Weaving is not the only fiber art practiced in Iceland. In the mid-'70s textile artists returning home from studies abroad brought with them an interest in limited edition, hand printed textiles. To make printed fabric available at a reasonable price, 12 women artists formed a cooperative that allowed them to make direct contact with customers





*Leifur Breidfjord and Sigríður Johannsdóttir with Birthday of the Seagod, 1981; 47 by 53 inches. Above, Behind a Mask 1-3, 1980; each tapestry panel 21 by 16 inches.*

*Below, Steinunn Bergsteinsdóttir and her First Day of Summer, 1982; cotton and straw, 6 by 6 inches.*



and thus eliminate the traditional shop or gallery markup. The **Galerie Langbrok** was established in Reykjavík in 1978.

"Together we are stronger," say the Langbrok members, most of whom are also members of the Textile Guild. Today the group has grown to 14 members who tend the gallery in turn. They frequently introduce new fabrics into the gallery, but one can also see the same print season after season. A good pattern must have a longer life than fashion goods, they say.

Ten percent of sales from the handprints—and from their one-of-a-kind work—goes into the common treasury. This money is used to restore the beautiful wood frame house, one of the oldest in the heart of Reykjavík, in which the gallery is situated.

"It is no coincidence that we are all females," says Langbrok member, **Asrun Kristjansdóttir**. "It is a conscious decision—our cooperation is excellent." Although female dominance in textiles is no longer taken for granted, it is quite natural that women should be drawn to weaving as a

vehicle for expression. Textile art in Iceland has been a woman's culture and it still is.

Asrun has worked mainly on fabric prints. Recently, she has begun to combine her fabric with box-like metal constructions in which she stresses the importance of the structure of the material. Miniatures often serve her as prototypes for her larger works, in much the same way that the stage designer uses a model.

The theatre has been an area of interest of another Langbrok member. **Gudrun Audunsdóttir** has made soft stage designs, puppets and costumes for three plays. Gudrun has always been interested in costume and clothes, and garment images often appear in her painted or printed textile pictures.

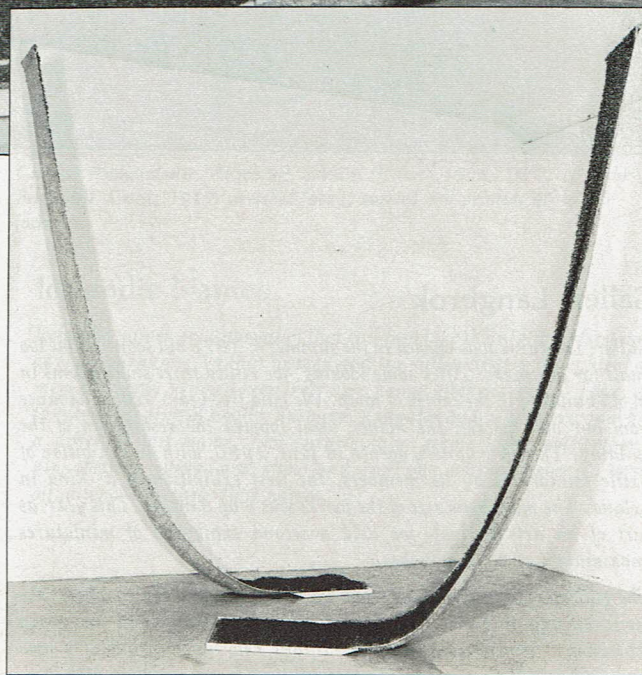
**Eva Vilhelmsdóttir** is a clothing designer. After working for years for one of Iceland's largest clothing exporters, she recently opened a workshop/retail store in Reykjavík where she designs suede and leather garments for women and





*Growing Sculpture* has been installed in several exhibitions and will be included in The Scandinavian Touch show that is on tour in the United States through 1983. Says the artist of the project: "The process took four days in Reykjavik but can take less time, depending on the heat. The growth has to be three-quarters of an inch high and green before it can be hung. It must be hung one day before the opening of the exhibition so that water can drain from it. During the exhibition the strips should be watered every now and then, but only in the trays."

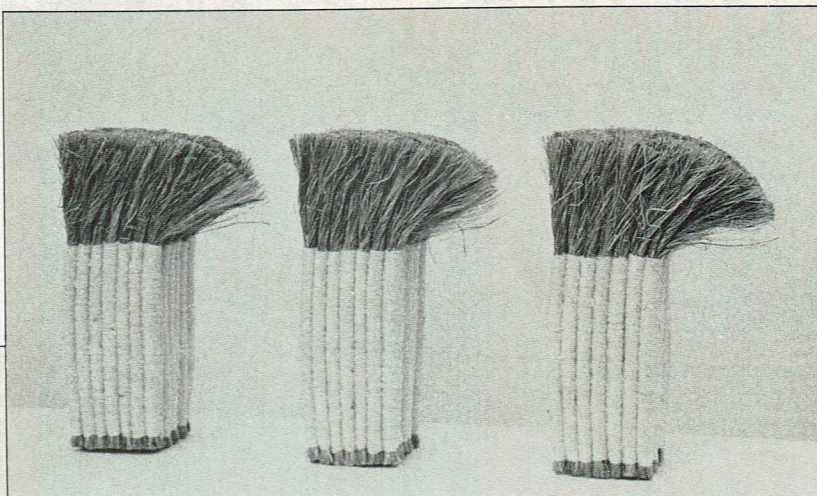
This series of photographs above depicts the process. Top left, the sculpture begins with two rolls of cloth rolled up in plastic, a 1,500 gram package of seeds and two trays, the only items reused in subsequent installations. Top middle, after laying the plastic and cloth strips on the gallery floor and thoroughly wetting the cloth, the artist sows the seeds on the cloth. On the second day she waters the seeded cloth again. Top right, on the third or fourth day ("depending on how fast it grows"), the artist prepares to hang the living cloth. She begins by inserting a stick at what will be the top end of the strip. Above, Gudrun Thorkelsdottir arranges *Growing Sculpture*. Right, two facing strips are suspended from the ceiling and rest in the floor trays. Photos courtesy of Scandinavia Today.



Gudrun Thorkelsdottir. *Growing Sculpture*, 1979; cotton and seeds; 148 inches.



Ragna Robertsdottir.  
Three Verticals II,  
1982; linen and sisal,  
7 by 4 by 3 inches.



men. In addition to designing clothes, Eva creates miniature textile sculptures.

Increasingly, Icelandic textile artists are working three-dimensionally. **Ragna Robertsdottir** has been creating textiles that have become sculptural but at the same time retain the softness and warmth of the textile surface. Her *Things* series consists of conceptual works that attract the mind as well as the eye. Ragna creates a strong effect with little means, using thread-covered sticks in her simple form studies, which balance the interplay between movement and stability.

Another textile artist using the textile medium for her conceptual work is **Gudrun Thorkelsdottir**. In one of her strongest and most poetic works, *Growing Sculpture*, she sows seed onto textile cloth and nurtures it to create a green living sculpture. Gudrun's works are an instant link with nature.

**Steinunn Bergsteinsdottir** is a textile designer, print-maker and weaver whose imagery derives from nature. In a recent series of miniatures she interwove reeds and grasses with Icelandic wool. The landscapes that emerged hover between naturalism and abstraction.

Most of the artists profiled here are graduates of the Icelandic College of Arts and Crafts in Reykjavik. Many of them continued their studies in various foreign countries but all returned to their island. They have succeeded in overcoming the danger of artistic isolation by opening themselves to new ideas without losing their personal ways of expression. This blending of influences will enrich the Icelandic textile arts in years to come. •

*Hrafnildur Schram is an art historian with a strong interest in textiles. She lives in Reykjavik.*