A Forgotten Artist Remembered: 
The Tapestry Weaving of Pauline Fjelde

by Lila Nelson

Pauline Fjelde (1861-1923) deserves recognition and remembrance beyond the circle of family and friends who recall her with love and admiration. Her strength, kindness, and generosity alone make her a special human being. But, in addition, her skill and artistry in embroidery and weaving were of the highest level. Unlike her talented brother Jakob, however, a sculptor whose works are recognized even beyond the Norwegian-American community, Pauline has been largely forgotten. Many Minnesotans know Jakob's bronze statue on the grounds of Minnehaha Park in Minneapolis, for which he won a medal at the 1893 Columbian Exposition. But very few know that at the same exposition Pauline and her sister Thomane were similarly honored for the first embroidered depiction of the Minnesota State Flag. NORWEGIANS IN AMER-ICA, published in 2002, for example, mentions Jakob as well as his talented son Paul, but ignores Pauline and Thomane.
Attention should be given to the significant production of the Fjelde sisters, who from around 1890 to 1918 supplied the important families of Minneapolis with exquisitely embroidered domestic linens of every kind. They also produced many banners for Norwegian organizations as well as regimental and state flags. And they taught their skills to niece Amy, who continued an embroidery shop in downtown Minneapolis until 1959. This article, however, will focus its concerns on the weaving of Pauline, with the re-entry of Thomane as a partner who, near the end of Pauline's life, completed a final section of her sister's most famous work.

A number of factors in Pauline Fjelde's early life were important to her future development. The role of her family was significant. The sixth child of Paul and Claudine Fjelde, she grew up in a modest but comfortable home near Aalesund, Norway, supported by her father's furniture business. Known as an accomplished cabinetmaker and wood carver, he must have set a high standard of craftsmanship for all his progeny. Pauline showed an early interest in drawing and painting taught in her grammar school, and she liked working with bright colored yarns while learning handwork from her mother. The family appears to have remained close-knit even as an ocean divided it when emigration to America began.

Another factor, unfortunate in itself, affected Pauline's early life. Around the age of twelve she caught what the family called a "crippling disease" that spread through her home valley. The result was a permanent curvature of the spine and a general physical frailty that made drawing, painting, and embroidery likely interests for her to develop.

The family began dividing in 1871, when the oldest son Oswald left for America, followed shortly by father Paul, who hoped to relocate his furniture business. But his death in 1873 from smallpox left a wife and seven children in Norway. Oswald remained in the United States, moving to Minneapolis in 1881. Prior to this time, the talented fourth son Jakob left to study in Oslo and then at Copenhagen's Academy of Fine Arts. During his Copenhagen study, he helped establish Pauline as a needlework instructor in Copenhagen and met his future wife Margarethe Madsen. In 1887, after Jakob had studied in Rome and Pauline had probably returned to Aalesund, the two immigrated to Minneapolis, Minnesota, preceded slightly earlier by Henry, another brother. And a year later, they were followed by sister Thomane, brother Herman, and mother Claudine.

Minneapolis, a rapidly growing city with a Norwegian population of over 12,000, was becoming a cultural center for Norwegian-Americans. Already in 1888 Pauline was listed in the City Directory as an embroidress for a Mrs. Emma Snodgrass, where Thomane also worked while brother Herman attended the University of Minnesota. Only two brothers, Thomas and Klaus, remained in Norway; but regular letters kept them in close touch.

These ongoing family connections were undoubtedly significant throughout Pauline's life. In 1890, sister Thomane and Pauline began an embroidery business that continued in various locations until 1918. From about 1910, however, much of the work was done by their niece Amy Fjelde, daughter of brother Oswald. Amy took over the business around 1918, maintaining a shop in downtown Minneapolis until 1959. Other nieces at ages eleven and sixteen lived with "Tanta Paula" when their father Herman died. Recollections by the children are of a kind and loving person who was also intelligent, well read, and lively. Her generous nature evidently extended beyond the family, however, because she welcomed others into her home and had a wide varied circle of friends. It appears likely that the family connections must have been
invaluable when Pauline began her more and more consuming interest in tapestry.

To begin the story of that development, I would like to quote directly from Gail Aaneson's unpublished 1971 masters thesis on Pauline Fjelde (Chapter 2, Pgs 17-18):

In December of 1910, Pauline Fjelde returned to Europe again. A writer in the Minnesota Posten in 1965 states that Pauline Fjelde went to Europe at that time to study weaving. She had two aims: one was to create a monument to the American Indian and the other was to begin an arts and crafts movement among the Norwegian-American people comparable to the one in Norway. 34 ("Famous Minneapolis Tapestry at Norweg. Museum for Harald's Visit," Minnesota Posten November 18, 1965)

Miss Fjelde wrote in a Norwegian-American publication, Kvindens Magasin, that for a long time she had wanted to make a large tapestry. She went to Copenhagen where she gave the Danish painter Hans Andersen Brendekilde the assignment of making a preliminary sketch of the tapestry which was based on a theme from Longfellow's poem, "Hiawatha." she had earlier embroidered figures of Hiawatha and Minnehaha. 35 (Pauline Fjelde, "Kunstvævning," Kvindens Magasin, 6:3 March 1915).

In Denmark, she saw the Gobelin weaving made for the Ridersalon in the palace at Fredriksborg and immediately set out to study this weaving in Copenhagen. Later she went to Paris to inspect the weaving at the Gobelin factories where she studied with a Mr. Gabriel Gonnet. She was particularly impressed by the tapestry "Vertumo and Pomone" done by Gorguet which she saw at the Luxembourg Palace. 36 (ibid.)

While in France, she ordered from the Gobelin factory all the yarns she needed for the Hiawatha tapestry. Miss Fjelde had sent to Minneapolis over 500 shades of yarn to be used for the work.37 (Gudrun Hansen, personal interview, Minneapolis, November 1969; Pauline Fjelde Pratt, personal interview, Grandin, North Dakota, April 1970; Florence Fjelde, personal interview, Minneapolis, April 1970)

After studying Gobelin weaving, Miss Fjelde traveled to Norway to learn Norwegian billedvævning (Picture Weaving) techniques. It is not clear where or with whom she studied, but she made reference to Frida Hansen, a Miss Christensen and Karen Meidal in the article written for Kvindens Magasin. 38 (Pauline Fjelde, "Kunstvævning," Kvindens Magasin, 6:4 March, 1915) From Norway also she had a loom and large quantities of yarn sent to the United States. 39 (Pauline Fjelde Pratt, personal interview, Grandin, North Dakota, May 1970)

Miss Fjelde's stay in Europe was one and one half years. When she returned to Minneapolis she immediately began weaving. (end of quote)

Pauline's years of work with embroidery undoubtedly were helpful when she turned to weaving. Even so, her progress in an area requiring different tools, materials, and techniques was impressive. (A 1994 article about the Hiawatha Tapestry in the April Sons of Norway VIKING mentions in passing that Fjelde studied "embroidery and weaving" in Copenhagen when living there in the 1880s, but there are no indications that she was weaving at that time.) Within a couple of years of her return from Europe she had produced several worthy pieces and possibly had already warped her large upright loom for her most ambitious work.

We know of two weavings, which probably preceded the Hiawatha Tapestry, but we do not know on what loom they were woven. The first, reproduced in a black and white photo (Figure 54, p. 65) in Gail Aanesen's thesis, (18 ½" x 26 1/8" with fringes on the long sides) appears to be
a table runner or possibly simply a study in the type of traditional Norwegian tapestry weaving sometimes called “rutevøy” or square weave, popular especially along Norway’s west coast for coverlets in various geometric designs. Colors were joined through various ways of interlocking, producing sturdy and often reversible objects. Typical designs were variations of crosses, diamonds, squares, and eight-pointed stars. Whereas many of the older pieces had an all-over design, Pauline, who may have originated her motif, chose a central focus, mirror-imaged on either side. It appears from the photograph as if joins are in double or single interlock.

The Eider Duck Tapestry (55 1/2” x 69 1/2”) was designed by the Norwegian artist Thorolf Holmboe, and marked a turn from the traditional rutevøy to the “billedvøy” (picture weaving) tradition, which introduced other techniques to solve new problems. (Aanenson thesis, Figures 59, 60, 61, pages 71-73) Non-geometric designs could not be woven across the loom but had to be built up in specific areas, making other types of color joins essential. The Eider Duck does have a woven “frame” which would have necessitated an interlock or sewn join along the sides where the frame joined the central motif. All other lines, however, are exuberantly curvilinear and probably were executed by the Gobelin slit technique: The printed photographs give evidence of slits. Whereabouts of this tapestry are unknown, but it had in the 1970s showed evidence of damage from dry cleaning and exposure to light.

The materials for the previous two tapestries, which I have not seen, are described by Aanenson as linen and wool. My own recent examination of Fjelde’s later works reveal warps of “fiskegarn,” the tightly spun seine cotton used for this purpose by some tapestry weavers in Norway since the 1960s and possibly earlier. The wefts, about which I will go into detail later, are a fine two-ply wool, which Fjelde combined in three strands for rich color variations.

Lila Nelson and Jane Connell examining bobbins of thread used by Pauline Fjelde for Hiawatha tapestry.

If the Hiawatha Tapestry was begun in 1912, the Animal Kingdom and the Nisser tapestries, supposedly woven about 1913 and 1915 respectively, must have been done on another perhaps smaller loom. There is no mention in any sources, however, of other looms. (Claudia Pratt Fjelde, a descendant of Thomare, owns an upright loom given her by her grandmother Pauline Claudine Henchen Fjelde Pratt, who died in 1978 or 79; but it probably dates from the thirties and, according to Claudia, was too small for executing the Hiawatha tapestry.) Both of these were designed by others, the Animal Kingdom by Thorolf Holmboe and the Nisser by an unknown Norwegian painter; and both incorporate billedvøy as well as Gobelin weaving techniques.

The Nisser tapestry (36 ¼” high plus 4 ¼” fringes each side, and 25” wide) was woven as seen, from bottom to top. Warp is 12/9 “fiskegarn” sett about 10 ends per inch and tied off with overhand knots. The weft is a fine two-ply wool, used usually in three strands, with about 17 picks per inch. All ends have been
needled back into the work, so the tapestry is reversible; in fact, the reversed woven initials of the weaver indicate that the side viewed as the front at present was originally the back. Perhaps the extensive fading of colors on the “right” side was the reason for this change.

Nisse tapestry

The Nisser has a childlike appeal, depicting two of the tiny Norwegian beings who guard the family farm but resort to mischief if not provided with bowls of porridge. Here the magpie is taunting them by stealing the spoon from their bowl. The flat background gives way to an impression of perspective and depth, and the large areas of snow are more in evidence than the usual stylized design elements in billedvev. However, the dark outlining of all major objects is typical of billedvev. This outlining, as well as the woven side borders, is achieved through single interlock. Short slits are also used as design elements. While an effective use of color and outlining and a general competence is already evident, some exposed warps and slight awkwardness in facial delineation makes me surmise that this might have been one of Fjelde’s earliest tapestries.

Animal Kingdom tapestry

The Animal Kingdom (67 ½” high with 6” fringes, 55 ½” wide, sett about 10 ends per inch, about 17 picks per inch) portrays whimsical and almost childlike animal figures—a fox, a resting bear and a monumental owl—in a realistic fashion but set against a flat ground filled with stylized mushrooms, flowers, and trees. The colors, now very faded, were once bright and warm. These elements relate to billedvev, but they are rendered in primarily Gobelin techniques. There appears to be no evidence of the dovetailing or broad hatching techniques typical of billedvev. Like The Nisser, however, weaving is vertical with top and bottom knotted warp fringes and is completely reversible. Brief slits are much in evidence, but longer joins are
single interlocked, as is the occasional dark outlining of motifs.

Of particular and previously unmentioned interest in The Animal Kingdom are, along the lower border, its two woven signatures. To the left are the familiar joined P and F of Pauline Fjelde. But on the right are a T joined to a lower H, and these must surely identify Thomane Fjelde, married in 1894 to J. Martin Hansen. This makes much more plausible the family's information that Thomane completed a final unfinished portion of The Hiawatha tapestry either before or after Pauline's death in 1923. The skill required for that complex work could hardly have been developed without some considerable prior experience.

Both the Nisser and Animal Kingdom tapestries are in the collection of Vesterheim the Norwegian-American Museum in Decorah, Iowa.

The Hiawatha Tapestry

While a few Norwegian immigrant women were weaving tapestries during the arts and crafts movement at the turn of the 20th century, most were in the style and techniques of geometric designs as found on earlier rural Norwegian coverlets. Fjelde instead expressed her interest in the American Indian through a pictorial tapestry which combined elements of both the Gobelin and billedevv traditions. Her subject, based on Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem The Song of Hiawatha, depicts the young warrior returning to the wigwam of Nokomis and his beloved Minnehaha with a slain deer over his shoulders.

The 8 1/2 x 10 foot tapestry is woven with a warp of 12/9 fiskegarn sett at 13 ends per inch and a weft of fine 2 ply wool used in three strands on standard pointed wood bobbins. The warp is very likely to be of Norwegian origin, but the source of the weft is as yet undetermined.

When the Scottish weaver Archie Brennan, once director of the Edinburgh Tapestry Company, examined a sample of the yarn in March 2003, he speculated that it might be from Gobelin because it was similar to yarn from that source used in Edinburgh. Attempts are being made to follow up on his suggestion. Family members have indicated a palette of 500 weft colors, which seems somewhat dubious until one recognizes the mathematical possibilities for mixing if initial colors were even fifty or less. Woven on a high warp loom in the typical side to side continental fashion, the weft becomes the vertical hanging element. It is not known if Fjelde wove with the front or the back facing her, nor do we know the nature of the cartoon supplied by the designer Brendekilde. Ends are cut short on the back; some are knotted and others are carried as far as two inches from one motif to another. Border warp fringes on the sides are secured with overhand knots. The piece has two signatures in the lower right, the woven letters “PF” and the embroidered full name “Pauline Fjelde.”

The style of the main subject is realistic and painterly, faithfully and expertly reproduced in yarn by the weaver. The sun and shade dappled forest background is achieved through subtle color blending, hatching, and effective line emphasis through open slits. Awareness of perspective is evident in the large figure of Hiawatha, right foreground, turned toward the
small figures of the women before their wigwam, and the muted colored Minnehaha Falls behind them.

The strong four-sided, six-inch wide woven border of the tapestry adds immeasurably to its total effect. It consists of 43 vignettes depicting in stylized silhouetted shapes scenes from the everyday life of the Indian. All are in a soft grayed brown against a lighter ground with simplified uncluttered forms, giving a sense of ritual importance to each. Seemingly simple in execution, they are framed by narrow single-interlocked borders on each side plus an additional border of stepped diagonals. Further, the scene is identified by the expertly woven words from Longfellow’s poem:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Through their thoughts they heard a footprint,} \\
\text{Heard a rustling in the branches,} \\
\text{And with glowing cheek and forehead,} \\
\text{With the deer upon his shoulders,} \\
\text{Suddenly from out the woodlands,} \\
\text{Hiawatha stood before them.}
\end{align*}
\]

Displayed numerous times in midwestern museums, including the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and the Walker Museum as well as Vesterheim in Decorah, Iowa, Marion Nelson also considered the Hiawatha Tapestry a perfect work for his NORSK I AMERIKA exhibition in Hamar, Norway, in 1988. “It represents,” he said, “Norwegian craftsmanship applied to a distinctly American subject. It is truly Norwegian-American.”

As we recognize the broad renewal of appreciation and respect for tapestry weaving in much of our world today, we can also laud Pauline Fjelde for her mastery of the traditions of medieval Europe as well as the billedev tradition of Norway and for skillfully making them both her own.

Nisse:
Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum, Luther College Collection, #LC727.
Museum purchase with funds from Mrs. Finn Magelssen, Mrs. Jon Norstog, Mrs. JCK Preus, and Mrs. HA Stub.

Animal Kingdom:
Gift of Gudrun and Elizabeth Hansen.

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Vesterheim Card Features Nelson’s Weaving

Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum’s Collection Card for 2004 features a weaving by Lila Nelson. “Three Magi” is a pictorial tapestry (bleddeve) woven in 1982 and donated to the museum in 1991. Lila Nelson researched, practiced, and taught traditional Norwegian weaving techniques during her many years as textile curator and registrar at Vesterheim Museum. “Three Magi” is Lila’s interpretation of a popular theme in 16th and 17th century Norwegian tapestries. The three wise men arrive on horses and then present gifts to the Christ child. The tapestry was woven on linen in wool in shades of green, red, blue, and gold.

The color card is 6.25 x 4.5” and comes in packets of 8 with envelopes for $9.95 (plus s&h). The cards are available blank or with the holiday greeting: God jul og godt nyttår – Merry Christmas and Happy New Year. Order from the museum’s website (www.vesterheim.org), by email (giftshop@vesterheim.org), by phone (1-800-979-3346), or in person at the museum store.

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