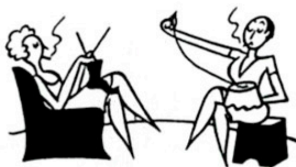
STITCHES IN TIME



Five years ago, the Metropolitan Museum of Art mounted an exhibition of tapestries from the Renaissance that turned into a spring blockbuster. Its sequel, "Tapestry in the Baroque: Threads of Splendor," opened last week. Most New Yorkers have, at some stage (usually around tenth grade), been schlepped up to the Cloisters to see the Unicorn tapestries, and some remember from their "Hamlet" footnotes that when Polonius is stabbed through the arras Shakespeare is referring to a woven hanging from a town in France where great tapestries were made. But the appeal of the show, to both a mass audience and an esoteric one—the contemporary art world—came as a surprise to curators, and the editors of *Tate*, a journal published by the eponymous gallery, asked Elaine Reichek for her take on the phenomenon.

Reichek is a grandmother who does embroidery, but, whatever associations that image has for you, forget them. A conceptual artist with a degree from Yale and a punkish shock of platinum hair, she is a leading figure in the field of mixed-media art. The Museum of Modern Art gave her samplers a solo exhibition in 1999, and her latest show, "Pattern Recognition," opened last week at the Nicole Klagsbrun gallery. "I think that what makes tapestry so topical is its relation to computer art," Reichek said recently, over lunch at her studio, in Harlem. "They both involve patterning, and reducing or enlarging an image to a charted form. A stitch, in essence, is a pixel. With any pixellated surface, whether it's a tapestry or a digital photograph, the more pixels you have, the higher your image resolution."

One assumes, wrongly, that Reichek learned to embroider at someone's knee. "My mother played golf," she said. One also assumes that, for an artist of her generation (she is sixty-four), choosing embroidery was a feminist statement about women's work. "I was one of four women in my class at Yale, which had no women on the faculty," she said. "But what I do isn't about being a 'woman artist.' Men historically did most of the major woven and embroidered pieces. When I started out, in the sixties, we, my peers and I, hated everything that looked like art. Chuck Close purged brushes. Richard Serra was throwing lead. I was looking for a different medium to make marks with, and my early works were minimalist line drawings with thread. But then I got interested in samplers, and that became my endeavor." Reichek's samplers include embroidered reproductions of a Web page, Seurat's portrait of his mother sewing, an Attic frieze, quotations in needlework from Freud and Colette, Charlotte Brontë's favorite collar patterns with a paragraph from "Shirley," and an extract from Darwin's journals. Her needlework literally gives depth to the texts and images that she translates. "Unlike a pen or a brush," she said, "a stitch pierces the surface that it covers and belies its flatness, becoming part of the supporting structure."

Reichek "shops" for her images on the Internet, and plots them on a computer. Until now, her embroideries have been executed by hand, each one requiring months of labor, but for "Pattern Recognition" all except two of the pieces were created by her "latest toy," a digital sewing machine. She calls the show "an alternative art history in swatches," and the swatches—twelve-by-ten-inch rectangles with pinked edges—include miniature versions of paintings by Mondrian, Warhol, Philip Guston, Ed Ruscha, Magritte, Nancy Spero, and Damien Hirst. "Sampling, pastiche, appropriation—all those techniques that we think of as contemporary—have an ancient history," she explained. "Embroidery has been called 'the Hypertext of the Silk Route,' and as local patterns travelled by caravan around the world they were 'downloaded' by people who didn't know where they came from."

The Met's "Threads of Splendor" lives up to its name. At the preview, Reichek noted the affinities between the art world today and the Baroque court culture that produced the masterpieces on display: "Tapestries were the trophies of a gilded age with an overheated art market, and only the super-rich could afford them. A cycle like Rubens's 'Triumph of the Eucharist' took thousands of man hours to complete, with the weavers sitting cheek by jowl at a giant loom, each one, like an autoworker, responsible for a separate component of the product—feet or foliage or faces. This, too, is an era of megabuck commissions, and many of the gigantic pieces intended for art palaces are, in whole or in part, outsourced and produced industrially." She stopped in front of "The Battle of the Granicus," the scene of an epic confrontation between Alexander the Great and the Persian satraps. It was commissioned by Louis XIV, designed by Charles Le Brun, and woven in the workshop of Jean Jans the Younger, at the Gobelins factory, in Paris, between 1680 and 1687. The capes and banners of a great horde billow in the wind as trumpets blare, shields flash, flesh yields to spear, and, under a lowering sky, rendered in countless minute ivory and blue pixels, fabulously muscled warriors, human and equine, tangle in the surf. "Wow," Reichek said. "Now, there's a bio-pic."

—*Judith Thurman*