

RISD MUSEUM

Term Limits: Textiles in Contemporary Art, November 8, 2005-February 5, 2006

Early in the twentieth century, artists of many nationalities began to explore the textile arts, questioning and expanding the definition of art to include fabrics for apparel and furnishings as well as unique textile works for the wall. Their work helped blur, for a time, distinctions among the fields of fine art, craft, and design. By the 1950s and 1960s artists working in fiber, influenced both by their studies in ancient textile techniques and by twentieth-century art theory, began to construct sculptural forms in addition to the more conventional two-dimensional planes. The term Fiber Art was coined in the 1960s to classify the work of artists who chose fiber media or used textile structures and techniques. It was joined in the 1970s by Wearable Art, applied to work that moved Fiber Art into the participatory realm of fashion.

These labels did not only define and introduce these movements, they also set them apart, outside the mainstream. Some critics, focusing solely on medium and process, and disregarding conceptual values, associated work in fiber automatically with the terms craft and design, a distinction that renewed old and often arbitrary hierarchies within the art community. Although categorization sometimes provides valid context, it is important to remember that any given term has a limited capacity to encompass and explain an object, an idea, or a movement.

At the same time, it limits one's ability to perceive creative endeavors without the shadow of another's point of view. The boundaries implied by terminology can marginalize or even exclude artists whose work blurs the traditional lines separating art, artisanry, and industry. This exhibition includes both unique works and production pieces made after about 1950. In all cases there is theoretical rigor, a fiber medium, a textile structure, and technical mastery. These qualities both celebrate and transcend process and function, giving rise to visually and emotionally powerful art. Each piece has pushed the limits of its medium and challenges the term that attempts to define and confine it. We invite you here not merely to set aside, but to question the assumptions and conventions inherent in these term limits.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Dorothy Liebes, American, 1899-1972

Textile sample, ca. 1947-72

Nylon braid, Lurex, cotton, silk; basket weave

Gift of the Rhode Island School of Design Textile Department

83.021.35

Liebes once told an interviewer that her assistants claimed that if you didn't keep moving in her studio you would get woven in something. This sums up Liebes's approach to her work: constant experimentation with materials, colors, and textures. By the 1960s, her revolutionary color combinations, use of new materials – ranging from wood splints to metallic lurex – and richly textured yarns opened the door to widespread commercial acceptance of her aesthetic. Her example encouraged other artists working in fiber to



Dorothy Liebes

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explore materials and processes outside the traditional scope of the medium.

Mark Pollack, 1954-
POLLACK & Associates, American
Flapper, 2001
Polyester, cotton; double cloth
Gift of POLLACK 2002.78.15.1

Mark Pollack explores the possibilities in weaving technology to create new and evocative textiles, confronting the geometric restraints of warp and weft. In this complex double cloth, designed for use at a window, the free edges of the second layer of fabric float and wave in the slightest breath of air, defying the underlying linearity of the composition. The supple textile filter light and air, turning a static, impermeable wall or window into a moving and changing work of art.



Françoise Grossen, Swiss, b. 1943
Fire, 1979
Hemp; knotting, wrapping
Gift of Threads Magazine 1988.080

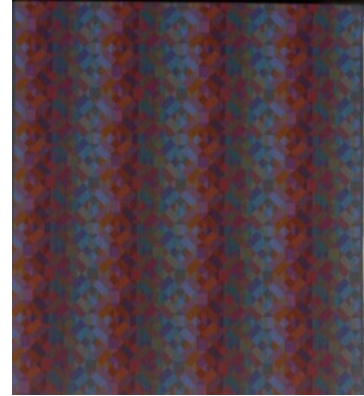
Like many of her contemporaries in the 1960s and 1970s, Françoise Grossen used off-loom techniques and unconventional materials to push the boundaries of traditional textile art, transforming the two-dimensional plane into three-dimensional sculpture with an architectural feel.

In this untitled work, Grossen juxtaposed the heavy, masculine, ready-made ropes and massive knots, reminiscent of the sailor's world, with lighter weight, almost feminine segments. Her construction demands attention, transforming a flat wall surface into a multi-layered space that can be appreciated equally from a distance or close at hand.



Mark Pollack, 1954-
Jack Lenor Larsen, Inc.
Labyrinth, 1981
Wool, cotton; compound leno weave
Gift of Jack Lenor Larsen 1988.050.1

Combining a commitment to intellectual principles with technical expertise, Mark Pollack challenges the very nature of functional or decorative textiles. In *Labyrinth*, his algorithmic exploration of the optical effects of color on pattern is guided and enhanced by the complex crossed-wrap weave (produced in only one mill in the world) that created the fabric.



Pollack studied textile design at RISD, where his earliest interests were in using the fiber medium to create unique works of art. A post-graduation job with Jack Lenor Larsen, another acknowledged master of the field of textile design, focused his attention on commercial textile production.

Junichi Arai, Japanese, b. 1932
Nuno Me Gara (Fabric Patterned Fabric), ca. 1980
Cotton, wool; doublecloth, jacquard, mechanical high-twist yarns
Gift of the artist 1988.040.1

Two characteristics define Junichi Arai as an artist: curiosity and vision. An acknowledged master of woven design, Arai creates technically superb fabrics that nonetheless carry a strong connection to worldwide traditions of hand-made cloth. Arai derived *Nuno Me Gara (Fabric patterned fabric)* from black and white photocopies of a scarf tossed on the bed of the scanner. The scarf itself was an Arai design, based on Ghanaian kente cloth, a strip of woven fabric with intricate geometric motifs. This confusion of pattern and explosion of scale abstracts the traditional Ghanaian cloth from its ethnic roots, and inks it to the global language of graphic art.



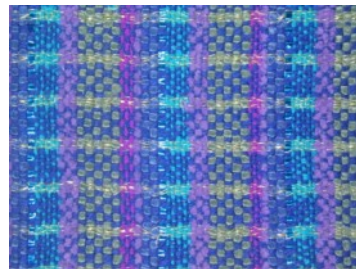
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Dorothy Liebes, American, 1899-1972

Textile sample, ca. 1947-72

Rayon, rayon chenille, wool, Lurex, metallic-wrapped yarn; plain weave

Gift of the Rhode Island School of Design Textile Department
83.021.57



Dorothy Liebes, American, 1899-1972

Textile sample, ca. 1947-72

Rayon, Lurex, Lurex braid, metallic-wrapped yarn; twill weave

Gift of the Rhode Island School of Design Textile Department
83.021.52



Dorothy Liebes, American, 1899-1972

Textile sample, ca. 1947-72

Rayon, wool, cotton, Lurex, metallic-wrapped yarn; twill weave

Gift of the Rhode Island School of Design Textile Department
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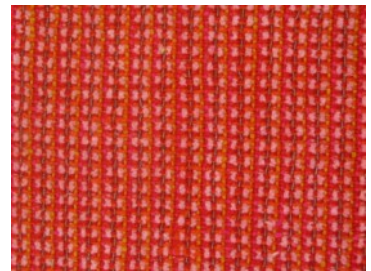
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Olga De Amaral, Colombian, b. 1932
Cesta Lunar 24 (Moon Basket), 1989
Cotton tapes; gilding, painting, interlacing
Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund 1992.006

Olga de Amaral's work transcends and transforms the categories of painting, sculpture, and fiber art. She deconstructs the traditional painted canvas plane, manipulating specially woven openwork tapes to recreate it in three dimensions, then painting and gilding the resulting form. In the *Cesta Lunar* series, the seductive surface, suffused with light and shadow, references the play of moonlight on the landscapes of her native Colombia.



Dorothy Liebes, American, 1899-1972
Textile sample, ca. 1947-72
Cotton chenille, metallic-wrapped yarn, synthetic fiber; plain weave,
twill weave
Gift of the Rhode Island School of Design Textile Department
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Cynthia Schira, American, b. 1934

Dark Light, 1985

Cotton, rayon; compound twill weave, supplementary weft
patterning, supplementary warp patterning

Daphne Farago Fund 1993.023

From a distance, as the title suggests, *Dark Light* focuses on the interplay of light and shadow. Up close, however, Schira's distinctive choice of yarns and expressive, complex weaving create a deeper visual experience. The curving diagonals that result from her use of loose twill weaves are punctuated by areas of strict angularity, breaking the rhythm of the curves. Schira draws the viewer into the surface of the woven plane through the dimensional qualities of the fiber medium.



Dorothy Liebes, American, 1899-1972

Textile sample, ca. 1947-72

Rayon, cellophane, synthetic fiber; plain weave, twill weave

Gift of the Rhode Island School of Design Textile Department
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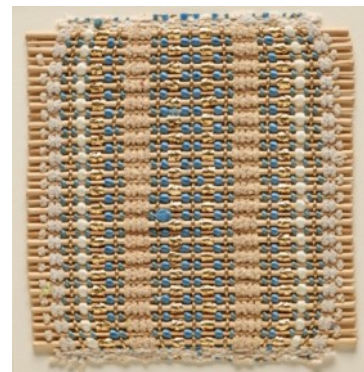


Dorothy Liebes, American, 1899-1972

Textile Sample, ca. 1947-72

Nylon, Lurex braid, rattan, cotton chenille; plain weave

Gift of the Rhode Island School of Design Textile Department
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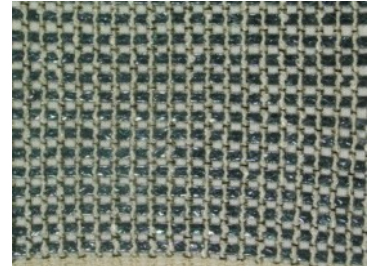


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Dorothy Liebes, American, 1899-1972
Textile sample, ca. 1947-72
Cotton, wool, wool roving, bast fiber; plain weave
Gift of the Rhode Island School of Design Textile Department
83.021.23



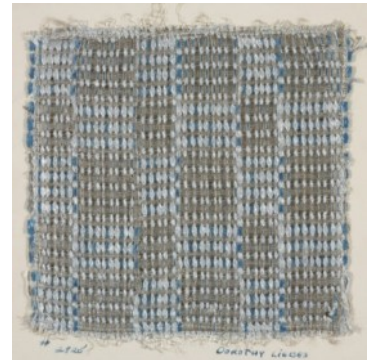
Dorothy Liebes, American, 1899-1972
Textile sample, ca. 1947-72
Cotton, rayon, nylon braid, Lurex, cellophane-encased Lurex braid;
plain weave
Gift of the Rhode Island School of Design Textile Department
83.021.22



Dorothy Liebes, American, 1899-1972
Textile sample, ca. 1947-72
Cotton, rayon chenille, rayon, Lurex braid, Lurex; twill weave
Gift of the Rhode Island School of Design Textile Department
83.021.21



Dorothy Liebes, American, 1899-1972
Textile sample, ca. 1947-72
Rayon, Lurex; plain weave-derived float weave
Gift of the Rhode Island School of Design Textile Department
83.021.5



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Diane Itter, American, 1946-1989
Kente Fan II, 1981
Linen; half-hitch knotting
Charles E. Merrill Trust Fund 82.036

The single most important factor in Diane Itter's decision to work with the fiber medium was the integration and indivisibility of image and structure. The linen thread she used was available in more than 400 colors, and she built up her images knot by knot, color block by color block. Her work combines intimate scale with the universal appeal of color harmonies and repetitive patterns. *Kente Fan* acknowledges Itter's debt to the strong textile traditions of two disparate cultures, those of Ghana and Japan.

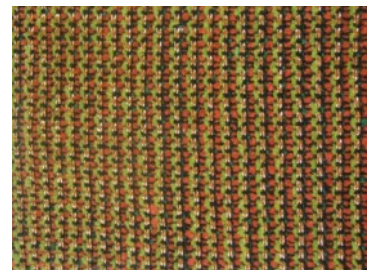


Bonnie Cashin, American, 1915-2000
Dorothy Liebes, American, 1899-1972
Woman's suit, 1968
Cotton, linen, wool, sueded leather; plain weave, jersey knit
Gift of Philip Sills 80.171.18

In the 1950s, when most fashion designers emulated the refined sensibilities of the Parisian couture, Bonnie Cashin sculpted a new image for the fashion-conscious American woman. Uniting her minimalist approach to seaming and detail with the bold colors and surprising textures of Dorothy Liebes's textiles, she created an iconic American look: casual but elegant and deceptively simple. Wearing Cashin clothing and Liebes textiles meant actively participating in an avant-garde aesthetic unique to American culture.



Dorothy Liebes, American, 1899-1972
Textile sample, ca. 1947-72
Rayon, cotton chenille, metallic-wrapped yarn; plain weave
Gift of the Rhode Island School of Design Textile Department
83.021.48



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Sheila Hicks, American, b. 1934
The Principal Wife, 1968
Bundled and wrapped linen, rayon and acrylic yarns
Gift of in memory of Mary Josephine Cutting Blair 2005.42

Inspired by her contact with the extended family connections she saw in polygamous marriages in North Africa, Sheila Hicks here explores how many parts can become one, split, and recombine into new units. Her bundled and wrapped yarns become metaphors for elemental life forces.

Hicks studied painting at Yale with Josef Albers, but discovered the possibilities of textile arts during a trip to South America in the 1950s. Her first fiber works were loom woven, but studying ancient Peruvian textiles directed her into off-loom techniques, which she used sculpturally to explore her ideas. *The Principal Wife* was shown in the seminal MOMA fiber art exhibition, *Wall Hangings*, in 1969.



Jean-Charles de Castelbajac, French, b. Morocco, b.1949
Arche de Noé (Teddy Bear Jacket), Winter 1988-89
Polyester and acrylic plush teddy bears; pieced
Collection of Gael Medelsohn 1997.93

Castelbajac's fashion philosophy has always incorporated the wearer as a participant; his milieu is not so much wearable art as performance art. By taking art off the wall and out of the gallery, Castelbajac's art-as-fashion cultivates exchange among the artist, the wearer, and the viewer. This plush, weighty jacket may be interpreted as political commentary on wearing real fur, or on the need, in an insecure world, for a comforting envelope for the body made from the security symbols of childhood.



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Kay Sekimachi, American, b. 1926
Ikat Box, ca. 1989
Hand-woven weft ikat-dyed linen
Gift of Daphne Farago 1997.45

The simplicity of Kay Sekimachi's container forms is founded on true technical virtuosity. In this piece, four interconnected planes, layers of cloth woven on the loom at the same time, open out into a box. Sekimachi explores the geometry inherent in two-dimensional woven structures to create three-dimensional sculpture.

Born in San Francisco, Sekimachi lived in Japan for a year in her childhood and grew up in a close-knit Japanese community. Not until the 1970s, however, did she return to Japan and discover its rich textile traditions. She incorporated what she learned there into her own art, tying together her eastern roots and her western education.



Lillian Elliott, American, 1930-1994
Figure, 1989
Bark, bast fiber, cotton; sewing, molding
Museum purchase: gift of David Carter in honor of Elmina Malloy and funds from the National Endowment for the Arts 1990.009

This vessel form is made up of irregularly shaped and stitched pieces of the inner bark of trees, celebrating the subtle colors and textures of this natural material in its raw state. In contrast to many of the works in this exhibition, Elliott's *Figure* is a visceral response to its unrefined medium, evolving as it grows from its triangular base into its oval opening.



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Ed Rossbach, American, 1914-2002

Western Star, 1989

Plaited ash splints, cotton plain weave, rawhide, and faux fur; bottom half covered with rice paper pattern with heat-transfer printing
Purchased with funds from the National Endowment for the Arts and the generosity of the Museum Associates 1990.003

In this basket form, Ed Rossbach combined a traditional basketry technique with historical references, but interposed modern materials and technology that accentuates the ambiguous imagery. The rough ash splint basket has been covered with a skin of color-photocopies graph paper, like the 'point paper' used by weavers to design textiles. Rossbach colored in the small rectangles to resemble American Indian quillwork or beadwork. The American flag carried by the riders can be viewed in very different contexts: flags were sometimes seized in battle and carried off as trophies, but they were also used as symbols of service in the U.S. Army, as protective devices, or simply as decorative motifs in tourist crafts. Is it emblematic here of pride or capitulation? The materials shape this context, but the medium is only half the message.



Richard Landis, American, b. 1931

Cluster, 1981

Cotton; doublecloth

Charles E. Merrill Trust Fund 82.043

Richard Landis's formal approach to color and pattern and his mastery of his craft are clearly articulated in his reversible double cloth weavings. Each block in the design is an intellectual in color theory and mathematics, as threads of different colors interlace and interact to create new combinations on both faces of the cloth as they progress across the loom. Landis's work represents action and change contained and structured by the imposed order and rhythms of geometry.



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Bonnie Cashin, American, 1915-2000
Dorothy Liebes, American, 1899-1972
Skirt, 1968

Cotton, linen, wool, sueded leather; plain weave, jersey knit
Gift of Philip Sills 80.171.18C



Bonnie Cashin, American, 1915-2000
Dorothy Liebes, American, 1899-1972
Weskis, 1968

Cotton, linen, wool, sueded leather; plain weave, jersey knit
Gift of Philip Sills 80.171.18B



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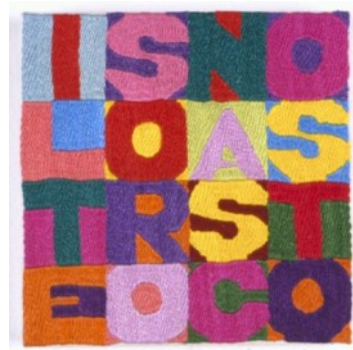
Claire Zeisler, American, 1903-1991
Private Affair III, 1986
Cotton, rayon; braiding
Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund 1990.005

With its heavy rope-like elements, Claire Zeisler's work is the antithesis of the functional or pictorial weavings – tapestries – that were the original fiber art. She was concerned instead with building dimensional structures, making form and gravity tangible. The organic fluidity of her vision was achieved through her use of a pliable fiber medium and off-loom textile techniques.



Alighiero Boetti, Italian, 1940 - 1994
Il Tesoro Nascosto (The Hidden Treasure), 1986-1988
Cotton; plain weave, embroidery
Gift of Hudson 2005.87.3

Like others in this exhibition, Alighiero Boetti explored mathematical constructs of order and geometry and ornament as a communication system. Unlike the others, whose work has been linked to terms like fiber artist, fashion designer, or textile designer, Boetti has always been called a conceptual artist. For his "embroidered paintings," such as *Il Tesoro Nascosto*, Boetti chose a culturally charged textile technique, traditionally associated with female craft, to convey his message.



Boetti provided designs – but not color choices – to Afghani women needleworkers, who used their own aesthetics in embroidering the decorative letters that slowly resolved themselves for the viewer into words. On the surface, his decision highlights the art historical divide between craft and concept, while attributing these works to Boetti alone reinforces the anonymity of women's work. For Boetti, however, engaging others to realize his ideas was intended to challenge established western notions of authorship and craftsmanship.

Mary Merke-Hess, b. 1949

Paper Sculpture, 1989

Paper; molding

Partial Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Barnet Fain

Gift from the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Barnet Fain 2001.80.33

Reflecting her roots in Iowa's farmland, Merkel-Hess's work always suggests forms grounded in the earth but reaching up to open out in the sunlight. Her technique is that of papier-mâché and collage, rather than basketry techniques of plaiting or interlacing. Paper as a sculpture medium has become more common over the last two decades.



Norma Minkowitz, American, b. 1937

Barrier, 1985

Acrylic, colored pencil, shellac; crocheting

Partial Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Barnet Fain

Gift from the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Barnet Fain 2001.80.34

Each artist whose work appears in this case has used a continuous thread or fiber as a way to draw a line off a plane and into three-dimensional space. They have created small sculptures that allude to traditional vessel forms, but rejected usefulness by exposing both their inner and outer surfaces. The prosaic fiber media, textile techniques, and allusions to traditional vessel forms contrast with the non-functional nature of the finished works.



Hisako Sekijima, b. 1944

Basket No. 330, 1988

Maple splint; knotting

Partial Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Barnet Fain

Gift from the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Barnet Fain 2001.80.31



Ferne K. Jacobs, American, b. 1942

Tower, 1987-1988

Linen; coiling, twining

Museum purchase with funds from the National Endowment for the Arts 1989.053



Chunghie Lee, Korean, b. 1945, (RISD Fulbright Exchange Scholar)

Breeze, ca. 1998

Resist dyed, painted and pieced bast fiber plain weave

Gift of Gayle and Roger Mandle 1999.20.1



The Korean tradition of pieced wrapping cloths has been appropriated – perhaps liberated – by Chunghie Lee. Pojagi were being collected seriously as art by the 1980s for their geometric simplicity and subtleties of color and translucence, far removed from their context of women's work and life in Korean culture.

By enlarging the scale of her pojagi, Lee focuses attention on its form apart from its function. She plays off the woven grid of the fabric. The pieces are not always cut square to the grain, but the stitching technique ensures their stability and strength, affirming those same characteristics in the anonymous women who created the art form.

Sheila Hicks, American, b. 1934

Mapped Satellite, 1990

Linen; half-hitch knotting

Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund 1998.67



Sheila Hicks is not bound to a single form in her art; she moves freely within the fiber medium from flat to volumetric, massive to miniscule. In *Mapped Satellite*, Hicks creates a sculpture for the wall – or perhaps a yarn painting – that is animated by contrasts and subtleties in color, balance, scale, and shape. Her work always implies connections and conversations between human activity and the natural world.

Wendy Wahl, American, b. 1961
Goddess Girdle, 1996
Paper, wool, plastic bead; knotting
Mary B. Jackson Fund 1998.44

This oversized string skirt references a hundred-tassels girdle worn by the goddess Hera in a Greek myth, and recreates a type of garment found carved on prehistoric female votive figurines. As such, it draws on a form and technique historically associated with women's lives, roles, and work to confront issues of power and status. By creating this earthy, grounded, ritual garment in an oversized scale, Wahl turns it into a cloak that, metaphorically, warps the viewer into its own powerful female aura.



Issey Miyake, Japanese, b. 1938
Yasumasa Morimura, Japanese, b. 1951
Pleats Please Guest Artist Series, no. 1, 1997
Polyester; plain weave, printing, heat-set pleating
Gift of the artist 1997.25

Issey Miyake denies any conceptual basis for the Guest Artist Series in his Pleats Please collection. The collaboration with photographer and video artist Yasumasa Morimura was meant neither to elevate the dress above fashion nor to simply decorate it. In use, Morimura's artwork, a self-portrait juxtaposed with Ingres's neoclassical nude, works with – but also disrupts – the personality of the wearer. Fashion and art interact and create layered impressions as the body inhabiting the dress adds dimension and movement to the garment and the image it carries.



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Reiko Sudo, Japanese, b. 1953
Nuno Corporation, Japanese, 1984-present
Agitfab, 1993
Polyester, newspaper; plain weave, heat setting
Gift of NUNO Corporation 1994.057

One of the principal designers for NUNO Corporation, Reiko Sudo constantly experiments with unusual materials and new technologies to create furnishing and apparel fabrics for an international luxury market. *Agitfab* is a play on the term *Agitprop*, or agitation/propaganda, a means of spreading a political message. Sudo used a heat-setting process to adhere newspaper clippings on political topics to a sheer curtain fabric. This length refers to the power struggles in Burma (Myanmar); other lengths of the cloth display clippings about the breakup of the Soviet Union and the reunification of Germany.



Bonnie Cashin, American, 1915-2000
Dorothy Liebes, American, 1899-1972
Jacket, 1968
Cotton, linen, wool, sueded leather; plain weave, jersey knit
Gift of Philip Sills 80.171.18A

