I base my images on life itself. The difficulty is shaping my experience so that it defers to the weave, yet is as strong as possible about what is on my mind.

– Hannah Ryggen, 1952

Many of Ryggen’s tapestries rely on secondary media sources to inform their depiction of events, ranging from incidents that occurred on Norwegian soil, to devastating international conflicts taking place hundreds or thousands of miles away. The critical role played by the left-leaning Norwegian newspaper Dagbladet in the shaping of Ryggen’s artistic practice is confirmed in a letter she wrote in 1961: ‘Right from my first arrival at Ørlandet, we received Dagbladet – for more than thirty years – and thanks to that we could follow what was going on in the world, which I at least was interested in … Even as a child I was a red revolutionary.’

In her rendering of seismic matters of war, murder, and protest, Ryggen deploys a realism that is inflected by symbolic images and interlocking pattern motifs, which connect the multiple sections of the narrative space. The symbolic order is invoked to heighten the emotional impact of scenes from life: 6 October 1942 (1943) is one of the most powerful examples of this strategy, in its blending of the horrific real-life execution of the local Trondheim theatre director Henry Gleditsch, with a fantastical flying Adolf Hitler, oak leaves (symbols of the Third Reich) emitting from his backside.

Ryggen expert Marit Paasche points out that the ‘conception of the act of weaving as both a vehicle for recounting history and as a political act has since been manifested in myriad ways throughout the world’, from Greek mythology onwards. Ryggen used her loom as a storyteller would, weaving self-portraits into her works in subjective response to the world around her, and to protest against the many injustices she witnessed.

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Hannah Ryggen: Woven Histories


Hannah Ryggen: Letter to Odd Hølaas, 12 October 1961, NKIM archive.

Upper Gallery
1. We and our animals / Vi og våre dyr, 1934
This narrative tapestry, like many of Ryggen’s, uses the ‘simultaneous succession’ method (widely used in medieval paintings and tapestries) to represent multiple moments in a character’s life within a single compositional space.

2. Ethiopia / Etiopia, 1935
An improvised tapestry woven in a tricer
Black heads – white diplomats
woven in a trice!

3. Death of Dreams / Drømmekådet, 1936
The human pattern – we are all hand in hand with their ancestors …

4. Liselotte Hermann, 1958
In Ryggen’s tapestry the condemned German Communist Liselotte Hermann is depicted in one panel holding her young son, from whom she was separated only a year after his birth, following her arrest in 1935 for high treason. This mother and child pose is adapted from the classical tradition of representing the Virgin Mary in the Rose Garden. Drawing on an explicitly Christian iconography, Ryggen invests Hermann with a befitting composure, in heightened contrast to the violence of her fate.

5. 6 October 1942 / 6 Oktober 1942, 1943
As art historian Marit Paasche observes of 6 October 1942: ‘The imagery is a fusion of news photos, visual impressions and imaginations. She utilised elements from diverse sources, ascribed them new colors and placed them together in such a way that the imagery resonated and remained in her mind’s eye. She had developed this unique compositional method over some time; as early as 1937 she wrote in a letter to her friend the architect Helge This: “What is dream and what is reality, for me, it all becomes enhanced in their mixing.”

6. Freedom / Freiheit, 1941
Art theorist Marta Kuzma writes of Ryggen that her ‘works often contained figures that neared geometric form and abstained from perspective illusion. […] Ryggen adhered to the formal traditions of 17th- and 18th-century Norwegian folklore tapestry. Improvising along this vernacular with an abbreviated formality, she conveyed a particular technical crudeness that illuminated life at its most rudimentary.’

Hannah Ryggen, ‘Etiopia’, 1935

Middle Galleries
7. Grini, 1945
The Trondheim region was of strategic importance to the Germans. Orlandet became a major Nazi military base during World War II: an airport was built between 1941–44 using prisoner of war labour, and there were over 7,000 German soldiers stationed there.

8. 8. A Free One / En Fri, 1947/48
The human pattern – we are all trapped in some grey figures bend their backs and work while we sleep some wear medals and stand above us all hand in hand with their ancestors …

Hannah Ryggen, ‘En Fri’, 1947/48

Piper Gallery
9. Mother’s Heart / Mors Hjerte, 1947
‘I always weave in a certain rhythm from beginning to end … I prefer to collect myself and then let loose with explosive effect.’
Hannah Ryggen, letter to Dyre Vaa, 22 May 1946

The bottom third of this tapestry contains a Norwegian translation of these lines from Four Quartets: When then devised the torment? Love
Love is the unfamiliar Name Behind the hands that wave The intolerable shirt of flame Which human power cannot remove. We only live, only suspire Consumed by either fire or fire Little Gidding, Chapter IV

11. Jul Kvale, 1956
We recall from history Men who suddenly appeared out of the blue – out of the stars? Came forward and expressed their opinion one the exact opposite of what the entire assembly adhered to A man who said no when everyone else said yes Jul Kvale’s no is my no.
Hannah Ryggen, ‘Jul Kvale’, 1956

12. Mr Atom / H.K.H. Atomsen, 1952
‘As far as the weaving technique is concerned, it is very simple: a horizontal line is interlaced with or passed around a vertical line. Triangular sections of the tapestry are built up roughly like this [sketch]. This is how the Baldishol and Coptic tapestries are made, and mine as well. I am limited by the vertical warp, you by the block of stone, and the resistance involved is something we both have to understand and submit to."

Hannah Ryggen, letter to the sculptor Dyre Vaa, 22 May 1946.

‘America meets with nothing but hatred and curses in South Vietnam.’

14. Fishing in the Sea of Debt / Fiske ved gjeldens hav, 1933
As Marit Paasche argues: “This tapestry has a special place in Norwegian art history. It is like no other tapestry or Social Realist painting, no doubt because Hans and Hannah Ryggen had first-hand experience with poverty and indebtedness. Nevertheless they had land and kept livestock, and this enabled them to be more self-sufficient than many of those living in the cities. The fact that the land and their few animals sustained

them was politically empowering for Hannah. Producing one’s own food and being able to get by was the essence of being.’

15. Domestic Gods / Hjemlige guder, 1951

16. Self-Portrait / Sjåførporträtt, 1914
On the back of this portrait the artist has written: ‘This portrait was made in 1914. This is the first picture I have painted in oil and the only self portrait I have ever painted. I was 20 years old at the time.’

17. Hannah Ryggen Timeline


Project Space

Common Threads in the Project Space invites visitors of all ages to respond creatively to the life and work of Hannah Ryggen and the processes involved in weaving.

Please ask our Visitor Assistants if you have any questions.

Designed by narratestudio.co.uk
This narrative tapestry, like many of Ryggen’s, uses the ‘simultaneous succession’ method (widely used in medieval paintings and tapestries) to represent multiple moments in a character’s life within a single compositional space.

2. **Ethiopia / Etiopia, 1935**

An improvised tapestry woven in a trice!

Black heads – white diplomats among them clubs and spears, and in everything my will to nail Mussolini with a black man’s spear!

Hannah Ryggen, ‘Etiopia’, 1935

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3. **Death of Dreams / Dømmedød, 1936**

Ryggen chose to depict the Nobel Peace Prize winner and pacifist Carl von Ossietzky not simply because of his plight as a prominent German political prisoner, but also as a response to a more local controversy in which the celebrated Norwegian author Knut Hamsun roundly defended Göring’s condemnation of von Ossietzky. In the tapestry, the prisoner’s hands, although cuffed, hold up a caduceus topped with a heart, symbolising hope and tolerance, but equally mourning.

4. **Liselotte Herrmann, 1938**

In Ryggen’s tapestry the condemned German Communist Liselotte Herrmann is depicted in one panel holding her young son, from whom she was separated only a year after his birth, following her arrest in 1935 for high treason. This mother and child pose is adapted from the classical tradition of representing the Virgin Mary in the Rose Garden. Drawing on an explicitly Christian iconography, Ryggen invests Herrmann with a beatific composure, in heightened contrast to the violence of her fate.

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5. **6 October 1942 / 6 Oktober 1942, 1943**

As an artist historian Marit Paasche observes of 6 October 1942: ‘The imagery is a fusion of news photos, visual impressions and imaginings. She utilised elements from diverse sources, ascribed them new colors and placed them together in such a way that the imagery resonated and remained in her mind’s eye. She had developed this unique compositional method over some time; as early as 1937 she wrote in a letter to her friend the architect Helge This: “What is dream and what is reality, for me, it all becomes enhanced in their mixing.”’

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6. **Freedom / Freiheit, 1941**

Art theorist Marta Kuzma writes of Ryggen that her ‘works often contained figures that neared geometric form and abstained from perspectival illusion. [...] Ryggen adhered to the formal traditions of 17th- and 18th-century Norwegian folklore tapestry. Improvising along this vernacular with an abbreviated awkwardness, she conveyed a particular technical crudeness that illuminated life at its most rudimentary.’

7. **Grim, 1945**

The Trondheim region was of strategic importance to the Germans. Drømedød, a character’s life within a single painting, no doubt because Hans von Ossietzky. In the tapestry, the prisoner’s hands, although cuffed, hold up a caduceus topped with a heart, symbolising hope and tolerance, but equally mourning.

Hannah Ryggen, ‘Etiopia’, 1935

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9. **Mother’s Heart / Mats Hjerte, 1947**

‘I always weave in a certain rhythm from beginning to end. I prefer to collect myself and then let loose with explosive effect.’

Hannah Ryggen, letter to Dyre Vaa, 22 May 1946

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11. **Jul Kvale, 1956**

We recall from history
Men who suddenly appeared
out of the blue – out of the stars?

Come forward and express your opinion
one the exact opposite of what
the entire assembly adhered to
A man who said no
when everyone else said yes
Jul Kvale’s no
is my no.

Hannah Ryggen, ‘Jul Kvale’, 1956

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12. **Mr Atom / H.K.H. Atomsen, 1952**

‘As far as the weaving technique is concerned, it is very simple: a horizontal line is interwoven with or passed around a vertical line. Triangular sections of the tapestry are built up roughly like this [sketch]. This is how the Baldishol and Coptic tapestries are made, and mine as well. I am limited by the vertical warp, you by the block of stone, and the resistance involved is something we both have to understand and submit to.’

Hannah Ryggen, letter to the sculptor Dyre Vaa, 22 May 1946.

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13. **Blood in the Grass / Blod i gresset, 1946**

‘Americas meets with nothing but hatred and curses in South Vietnam.’

This statement is a brutal summary of the United States’ involvement in the Vietnam War, published by Dagbladet in a July 1965 editorial.

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15. **Domestic Gods / Hjemlige guder, 1951**

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16. **Self-Portrait / Sjåføyrportræt, 1914**

On the back of this portrait the artist has written:
‘This portrait was made in 1914. This is the first picture I have painted in oil and the only self portrait I have ever painted. I was 22 years old at the time.’

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18. **Hannah Ryggen: Image Weaver / Hannah Ryggen: Bildskapende, 1963, 28 minutes, video transferred to digital file, producer: Lennart Ehrenborg, SVT1.**

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