

**Collection Focus: Polish Fiber**

October 30, 2024 – February 22, 2025

In 2013, RAM acquired a substantial selection of contemporary Polish fiber art. Since the initial gift, more works from a similar time period—1980s to mid-2000s—have been added to this area of the collection. This emphasis is unique to craft-focused institutions in North America and complements an organization situated in a community with large Polish populations in the surrounding cities of Milwaukee and Chicago. With over 35 pieces included, *Collection Focus: Polish Fiber* highlights Polish fiber art in both a microscopic and macroscopic way—underscoring the efforts of artists from a certain area of the world who, in turn, also reflect global interests.

Poland has a long history of textile production and design. Centered in the city of Łódź for most of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, textile manufacturing has been a large part of Poland's history and extends back earlier to traditional modes of weaving. Made of woven wool, hemp, and flax, and sometimes including cotton embroidery, traditional Polish textiles are made in a variety of designs associated with different cultural localities throughout Poland, and include both functional works and decorative objects.

In the late twentieth century, Poland experienced a dramatic shift as it transformed its government from a communist regime to a democracy. Living in a country experiencing intense social and political change, artists self-consciously made work reflecting personal interests and expanding upon, or deviating from, more traditional modes of working. Sometimes confronted with resource shortages, Polish artists were inventive in their practice. For example, the "miniature" format of several works in RAM's collection—averaging seven by seven inches in size—became a popular approach as it accommodated a strain on materials, time, and space, yet allowed for a way to work through ideas and techniques. Challenged with limitations, Polish fiber artists embraced the possibilities of atypical materials, innovative techniques, and/or compelling content. Traditional processes such as weaving or knotting served as the groundwork for experimentation. Artists would explore more abstract concepts, such as the human condition or emotion, while playing with material properties and dynamic compositions.

Reflecting shifts in their own country as well as global dynamics, Polish fiber artists metaphorically and literally pushed and pulled at tradition. RAM's capsule collection of Polish fiber art includes artists working with a range of subjects and experimenting with new possibilities. Respecting Poland's textile-rich past, which combined industry, traditional craft, and innovators, many embraced the fact that they could choose their own paths—pursuing traditional methods and materials, or leaning into the boundary pushing of the field happening globally, or, both.

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For further information:



culture.pl/en/article/the-history-of-polish-artistic-textiles



culture.pl/en/article/cepelia-how-handmade-came-back-into-polish-homes



youtube.com/watch?v=MQzpLLhN0fY



new-east-archive.org/articles/show/13510/textile-art-poland-60s-jolanta-owidzka-women-recollected

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Women Artists at RAM

RAM acknowledges the efforts of self-identifying women in the art world consistently and sincerely at all times. The museum highlights how women are inextricably woven—and often the foundation—of creative endeavors and discourse. By current count, 41% of the artists in RAM’s collection are women. This percentage—which is consistently increasing—is already substantially greater than the ratios calculated at other organizations with permanent collections and active exhibition programs. At RAM, work made by different genders is considered for inclusion in the museum’s holdings on equal terms. And notably, because RAM relies on gifts of artwork to build the collection, this policy has been reinforced by open-minded donors who have collected, and then donated, quality work regardless of the gender of the artist. The following is a list of women whose works are included in this exhibition. This effort—similar to efforts to highlight artists of color at RAM—is not meant to single out artists to stigmatize them but to magnify and cast a spotlight on their significance. It reflects intention, goodwill, and an attempt to reckon with years of historical underrepresentation. RAM hopes this provides opportunities for audiences to learn more about these artists and their ideas. Visitors are encouraged to take note and research these artists via the internet to find out more about their biographies and larger bodies of work.

Grażyna Brylewska-Pędziątek, Maria Teresa Chojnacka, Emilia Cecylia Domańska, Kazimiera Frymark-Błaszczak, Barbara Gałan, Anna Goebel, Bożena Kaluga, Lilla Kulka, Aleksandra Mańczak, Jolanta Owidzka, and Jolanta Rudzka-Habisiak