



MAJA FJÆSTAD

Hörby, 1873 – 1961, Arvika &

GUSTAF FJÆSTAD

Stockholm, 1868 – 1948, Arvika

Winters Night

Wool tapestry, 120 x 158cm,
Signed, F1923.

Provenance:

Sweden, private collection, until 2013

UK, private collection

Literature:

Jan Brunius, *Svenska Textilier: 1890–1990* (Signum, 1994), p.71

MAJA FJÆSTAD | *Winter's Night*

Fjæstad was one of the main instigators of the revival of Swedish Arts and Crafts, or Hemslöjd (Swedish Handicraft) movement in the early 1900s. Born Kerstin Maria Hallén, Maja was an interdisciplinary artist from the outset. Her education began with classes in wood working, forging and textiles at the Malmö Technical School, alongside private lessons for painting.¹ She applied to the Royal Academy of Fine Arts and was twice refused. Instead, she joined the Artists' Association School as one of the first female students between 1893–95, taught by prominent artists Anders Zorn (1860–1920) and Carl Larsson (1853–1919). It was Larsson who, at the *Konst- och Industriutställning* in Stockholm in 1897, introduced Maja to the young painter assisting him on his commission to decorate the stairwell of the Nationalmuseum, Gustaf Fjæstad.²

Gustaf studied at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm in 1891–92 and at the Artists' Association School. He had his breakthrough at the Artists' Association Exhibition in 1898, showing a series of snowy landscapes, an uncommon motif in Swedish painting at the time. He would become famous for these winter scenes, earning the moniker the “Master of the Hoar Frost”. After the Fjæstads moved to Värmland in 1898, an artistic community formed around them, known as *Rackengruppen*, or the Rackstad Group.³



Fig.1 Unknown photographer, Maja Fjæstad, 1901, Swedish Portrait Gallery

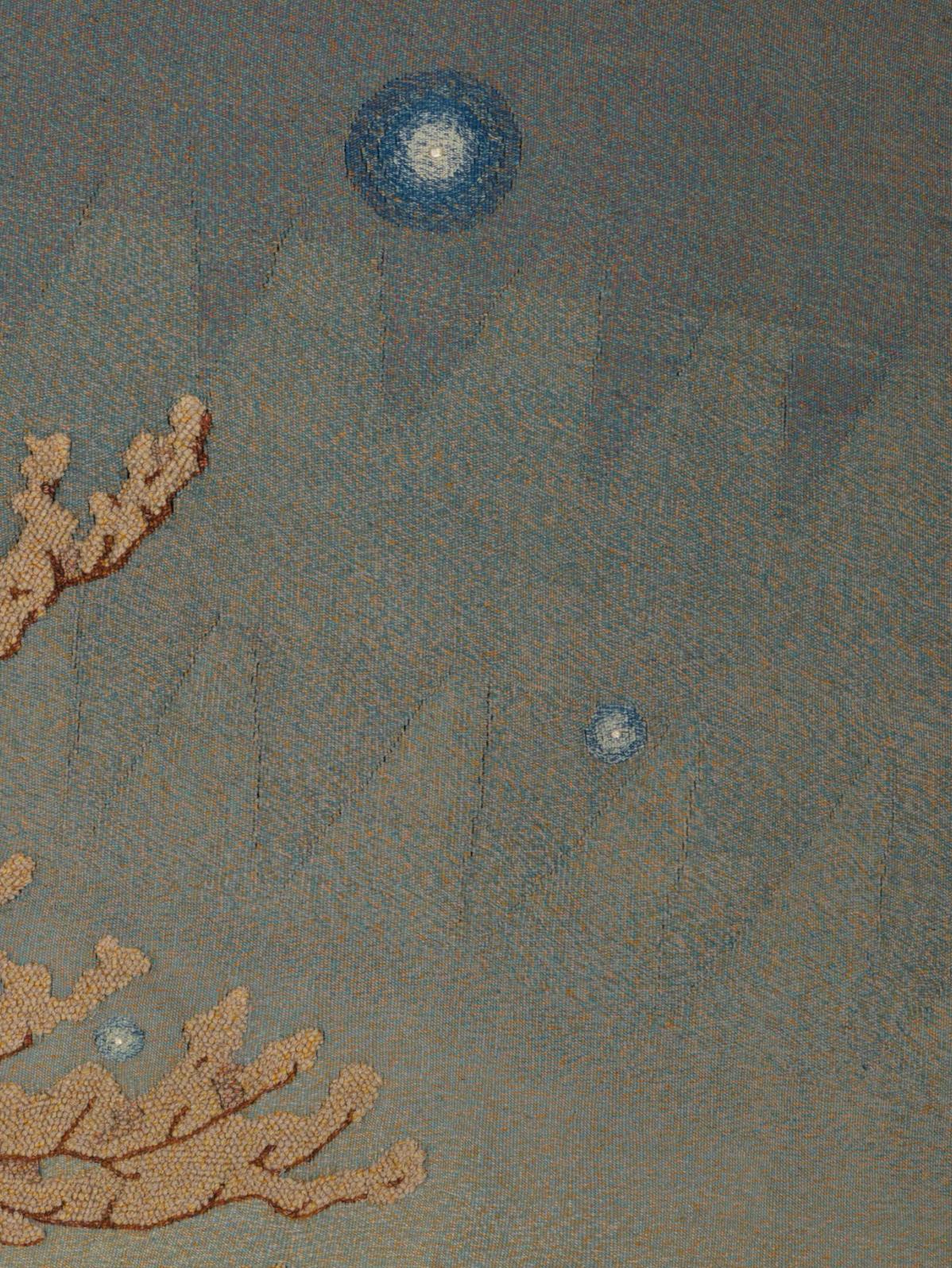


Fig.2 Unknown photographer, *Fjæstad Weaving workshop*. Source: Prins Eugens Waldemarsudde

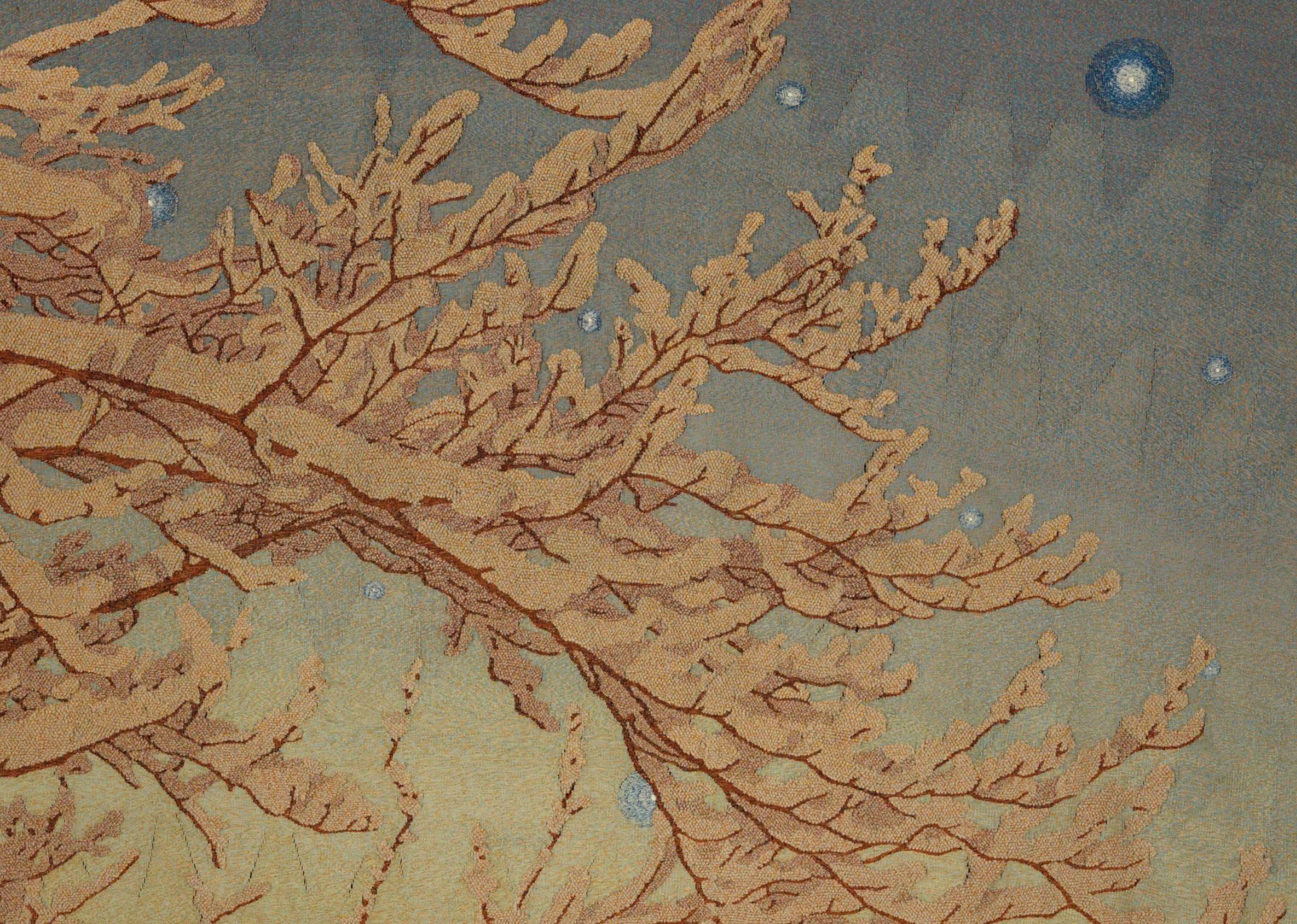
Comprising painters, furniture makers, weavers and musicians, Maja and Gustaf were integral leading personalities of this group; their “job was to get things started, instil confidence in people, encourage and criticise as needed,” as Maja later reflected.⁴ While Gustaf was primarily a painter, he had an early interest in textiles, and his marriage to Maja only increased this interest. His sisters, Amelie (1862–1938) and Anna Fjæstad (1865–1946) were both professional craftswomen, running a sewing workshop in Örebro before moving to join the Racken group. It was natural therefore, that many of Gustaf’s most successful paintings would also be produced as tapestries by the weaving workshop established by Maja in 1901 (fig.2).



Fig.3 Gustaf Fjæstad, *Glowing Sunrays with Snow Covered Rocks*, c.1913-15, oil on canvas, signed G Fjæstad



Gustaf found within the snowy landscape a dazzling array of colours, describing in a letter to Maja, colours so “enchanted and singular that one thinks the eye has changed.”⁵ This is manifest in the unlikely colours of his pointillist brushmarks in paintings such as *Glowing Sunrays with Snow Covered Rocks* (fig.3), with dots of purples and pinks overlapping. The influence of Gustaf’s “changed” eye is clear in the many colours of thread used in this tapestry, likely chosen by Gustaf and Maja collaboratively. In an interview published in 1907, Gustaf describes at length his involvement in selecting the perfect colours for weaving, striving to free himself from the “uncertainty of the dyer’s work”. He instructed the dyer to produce threads in all the “unmixed colours” he used during painting, before combining the threads to get an exact shade, as if mixing paint. This technique is clear in our tapestry, with the brighter patches of snow comprising white, ochre, and pale-yellow threads. The shaded patches have the same white and ochre threads, with purple and grey threads adding the coldness of shadows in the snow, just like *Glowing sunrays with Snow Covered Rocks*.





If the “mixing” of the tapestry’s thread is the work of Gustaf’s astute polychromy, the experimentation with texture can only be attributed to Maja. The multicoloured threads are brought to life by loosely threading wool in the weft, leaving loops to pile on top of one another. This is known as *rya* weaving in Swedish and is a part of textile tradition, both in everyday woven work, *slitryor*, and decorative works, *prydnadsryor*.⁶ This technique contrasts with the tight weave of the branches and the sky. The length of the loops of thread have been carefully judged so they protrude without drooping down. This creates the impression that the snow is weighing down the spindly branches, frozen in sculptural forms. After one sunny afternoon, the snow slips off the branches, and the tree springs back, released of its extra weight. Maja uses this traditional technique not only to represent snow, but to mimic this natural phenomenon. This blend of textures is added to further with the use of pure white silk thread in the centre of the stars, creating a vivid contrast against the blue weave of the sky.

The expertise in textile techniques that Maja drew on stemmed from her association with *Konstslöjdanstalten* - an arts and crafts workshop that was part of the museum now known as Kulturen in Lund. Spearheaded by artists Anna (1869–1898) and Georg Karlin (1859–1939), this organisation sought to preserve and develop traditional textile arts of Southern Sweden, drawing on the historic collections of local museums.⁷ While *Konstslöjdanstalten* was primarily a school, they commissioned many works from Maja. The organisation departed from models provided by the Arts and Crafts movement in England, exemplified by William Morris & Co., with the same aim to preserve traditional crafts in the face of the rise of machine produced goods. Maja would later reflect, in the script for a lecture on textile composition, that we have the “old tried and tested crafts to draw from, to learn from, to gain confidence through, but our task is also to create something new, to increase the value of the old.”⁸



Fig.4 Maja Fjæstad, *Kapsifolium* (Honeysuckle), Colour woodcut, 1917, Victoria & Albert Museum

This imperative to create something “new”, is clearly apparent in Maja’s own work. Such as her *Kapsifolium* (Honeysuckle) woodcut, which is now in the Victoria & Albert Museum, dating from 1917 (fig.4). The strikingly modern composition, closely cropped perspective and strong outline of the blossom against a vibrant background colour, illustrates Maja’s knowledge of, and interpretation on, Japanese woodcuts, using this as a basis to create something truly unique. We can see this when comparing our tapestry to the painting that likely served as its source material, Gustaf’s *Winter Night*, from 1923 (fig.5), illuminating Maja’s distinct artistic voice. In the painting, Gustaf renders the sky more conventionally as a gradient of dark blues to light greens. Maja interprets this through two clear bowed arcs in an idiosyncratic triangular pattern. These rays could be seen as representation of the northern lights, however equally, they may allude to Maja’s interest in Theosophy, shared by her husband and many other members of the Racken group. Theosophy, a mystical spiritual movement, started in the United States in the 1870s, which centred around the natural intangible forces that connect all things on earth. Maja spoke of aspirations to “purify one’s inner self and...become this radiant Light which constantly shines and radiates.”⁹ In this way these rays can be read as a universal light that emanates from all nature, abstractions that clearly connected Maja’s spiritual and artistic expression.



Fig.5 Gustaf Fjæstad, *Winter Night*, 1923, oil on canvas, 120 x 140 cm

The compositional negotiation between the two strongminded artists and spouses, echoes the tensions that were clearly apparent in their marriage. Maja was a fervent feminist and was elected chair of her local suffrage association.¹⁰ She felt her artistic practice was hindered by her “wifely” duties: “I would rather be Gustaf’s servant than his wife, for it is difficult – very close to despair!”¹¹ Despair was not Maja’s reaction for long, instead she poured her energies into achieving economic independence from her husband by selling her own work, specifically her tapestries and woodcuts. In her diary entry three years after the completion of our tapestry she leaves little room for doubt: “I wish I could start again as a free human being in the universe, with the freedom to do as I please”.¹² Although they would remain married, by 1927 Gustaf had to admit that his wife was “fully equal [in financial security], if not more secure than the most of us here [in the Racken group].”¹³

Maja had attained not just the financial separation she had

been seeking since 1916, but financial security through her commercial success and ingenuity. In 1927 she purchased her own plot of land on the edge of Lake Racken, and built her house, *Rösholm*, fully equipped with her own weaving studio (fig.6). In her diary she wrote, “What I wished for most of all has begun to come true – to live independently of a man. My house is ready. I am able to work quite a lot with art.”¹⁴ Gustaf was given leave to visit by Maja, and eventually Maja would build a studio for him in the grounds, their marriage would continue under these renegotiated terms.



Fig.6 Gunnar Ödvall, *Maja Fjæstad's weaving workshop in Rösheim*, 1932, Arvika Kommuns Bildarkiv

Much like the Arts and Crafts movement in England, the Swedish crafts revival was driven by a democratising impulse; a belief that ordinary people should be able to own beautiful things. The crafts revival was part of a broader movement of social reform in Sweden at this time, led by thinkers such as the feminist Ellen Key (1849–1926). Besides fighting for the rights of children, women and for the pacifist cause, Key argued in her 1899 text *Skönhet för Alla*, or, *Beauty for All*, that beholding the beautiful is a right for all people, and that beauty in the home can translate to more a beautiful society. Key's circle included artists like Hanna Pauli (1864–1940) and the Fjæstads' old mentor Carl Larsson. While there is no direct connection between Key and the Fjæstads, Maja dedicated much of her life to the fulfilment of Key's aims. The weaving workshop she established in 1901 became a weaving school under her sisters-in-law's direction, educating a generation of craftspeople. In 1911, she organised *Arvikauställingen*, a major exhibition of the revival of Arts and Crafts in Sweden. This led to her selection by a committee to plan an exhibition of arts and crafts for the Baltic Exhibition in Malmö in 1914. In 1922, the year prior to our tapestry, she established the cooperative *Arvika Konsthantverk*, where local artists and craftspeople could sell their work.

Our tapestry therefore stands as a record of Maja's struggle during these pivotal years striving for independence. As a professional woman artist, exhibiting regularly internationally alongside her husband, Maja had to make compromises, both at home and in her artistic production, however she fought for her own space, literally and artistically, room for her own experimentation and expression. The sale of works like this tapestry and her fascinating woodcuts, helped Maja to carve out her own independence. Simultaneously symbolising her compromises as well as, more pointedly, representing a vehicle for her self-emancipation. Maja's works are now present in leading museums around the world, including the Victoria & Albert Museum, British Museum, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm and the Carnegie Museum of Art

NOTES

¹ Axel Romdahl, “‘Rinnande Vatten,’ Gobelin af Gustaf Fjæstad,” in *Svenska Slöjdföreningens Tidskrifts; Organ for Konstindustri hantverk och hemslöjd*, 1907, 66.

² Agneta Fjæstad, *Fjæstads Konst* (Fjäderstad Förlag, 1999) 27.

³ For more on the Racken Group – see *Rackstadkolonin; Stämingsmåleri, bonsthantverk & design*, eds. Karin Sidén and Anna Meister (Prins Eugens Waldemarsudde, 2025).

⁴ Maja Fjæstad quoted in *Maja Fjæstad: Att se på Världen med Konstnärsogon*, eds. Hannes Trygg, Maria Hellstadius Wiberg, Anneli Strömberg (Votum, 2023), 113.

⁵ Fjæstad quoted in Agneta Fjæstad, *Gustaf och Maja Fjæstad*, 42.

⁶ This is known as pile weaving in English. Arianna E. Funk, “Slityra,” in *Handwoven Magazine*, January 8, 2021. Accessed December 10, 2025 <<https://handwovenmagazine.com/slitrya/>>

⁷ Drawing on the collections of the Kulturhistoriska föreningens museum and the Sydsvenska konstindustrilotteriet; Maja was one of many artists, including Helmer Osslund (1866–1938) and Märta Måås-Fjetterström (1873–1941) who were linked to Konstslöjdanstalten.

⁸ “För den skull ha vi den gamla beprövade hemslöjden att ösa ur, att lära av, få säkerhet genom, men vår uppgift är ju även nyskapa, att öka ut de gamlas värden.” Maja Fjæstad quoted in Maria Hellstadius Wiberg, “Textilkonst, konsthantverk och hemslöjd - Rackstadkolonins textiler,” in *Rackstadkolonin*, 2025, 170.

⁹ “kan rena sitt inre och bli detta levanda språkrör, bli detta strålande Ljus som ständigt skinner och strålar.” Maja Fjæstad quoted in *Maja Fjæstad*, 2023, 106.

¹⁰ She first became interested in feminism after going to a 1905 meeting in Arvika, also attended by the feminist politician Karin Fjällbäck-Holmgren

¹¹ Maja Fjæstad quoted in translation in *Maja Fjæstad*, 2023, 116.

¹² Maja Fjæstad, diary entry 1926; “jag skulle vilja börja om som en fri människa i universum, med frihet att handla som jag önskar” quoted in Agneta Fjæstad, *Fjæstads Konst* (Fjäderstad Förlag, 1999) 308.

¹³ Gustaf Fjæstad in a letter to his brother-in-law, 1927, quoted in Agneta Fjæstad, *Fjæstads Konst*, 1999, 310.

¹⁴ Maja Fjæstad quoted in translation in *Maja Fjæstad*, 2023, 116.

