



UNCONVENTIONAL MENTORING

by Mandy Pedigo

I had just returned to university as a non-traditional student to take some art classes with the plan of eventually applying to the MFA program when a small square book with “weaving” in the title caught my attention at a used book fair. In search for something I could not yet name, I never guessed that a little used book costing just \$1.50 would provide the push I needed to answer questions and help me find my artistic voice.

“New Designs in Weaving” by **Donald Willcox** (1970), takes readers on a tour through the Nordic countries of Sweden, Finland, Norway, and Denmark, profiling the work of noted artists, techniques and history in the region. It was the work of Finnish designer **Maija Kolsi-Mäkelä** (1911–1982) that caught my attention. Her work was elegant, simple and clearly inspired by nature. I had to know more about her!

I found an image online of a Kolsi-Mäkelä work that was purchased in a secondhand shop by a person in Helsinki. I fell

in love with the piece and emailed the person to inquire about it. *Ittarusko* (*Evening Glow*) graphically depicts the effects of a sunset and the radiant colors that result. Further internet searches yielded no information about her. I posted on a Finnish craft message board and received a brief biographical sketch from a member. Based on this simple paragraph, I have slowly expanded her biography over the years.

Kolsi-Mäkelä worked as an art director and principal designer from 1935 to 1976 at **Helmi Vuorelma Ltd.**, a company respected in Finland for its art and handicraft. Companies like Helmi Vuorelma utilized designers and a team of home weavers to make their items, a trend known as industrial handicraft. This home-based economy provided jobs for women and in part helped Finland survive hard economic times. Kolsi-Mäkelä designed numerous textiles during her career for Helmi Vuorelma, including home interior fabrics such as hand towels and curtains. Later she would expand into woven art textiles using double weave (*täkänä* in Finnish), ryas (*ryijy*) shag

woven pieces for walls and transparencies (kuultokudos). The only way to find images of these designs was through online international auction houses, and I collected many examples of Kolsi-Mäkelä's designs from these sale sites.

During my first semester in graduate school, I contacted Helmi Vuorelma Ltd., just before it declared bankruptcy in 2014, and was directed to the **Craft Museum of Finland** in Jyväskylä, a city in central Finland. The company had donated its archives to the museum, which also housed Kolsi-Mäkelä's own archives. The museum graciously emailed me images of some of Kolsi-Mäkelä's sketches as well as articles about her in Finnish and Swedish. I slowly worked to translate the articles to begin to better understand her and her process.

Late in December 2015, I found the first piece of Kolsi-Mäkelä's work I was able to purchase through a reseller in Sweden.

Asteri (Aster) is a transparent weave with linen in shades of blue. In an email exchange with the seller to find out what she knew about Kolsi-Mäkelä, I was sent an image from a Finnish magazine in 1967 with a photograph of *Asteri* on the cover.

Transparencies were a popular type of weaving found in Finland especially towards the end of the 1960s. They are traditionally woven with linen yarn and include spacing of the background threads to allow light to pass through which also reveals the weave structure of warp and weft. The areas of design are subsequently filled in with yarns to build the image.

Left page: **Maija Kolsi-Mäkelä** at an exhibition of her work in 1967. Photo: The Craft Museum of Finland Archives.

Bottom: **Maija Kolsi-Mäkelä** *Asteri*, transparent weave, linen. 19" x 19". Photo: Mandy Pedigo.





Over the years I acquired several transparency pieces including *Pim Pom 11*. It holds a unique place in my collection as it is mounted in a frame with stitching. I was able to purchase *Tähtisade (Meteor Shower)* from a Finish collector in 2016. This piece was particularly poignant as it features the same motif found in the background of a photograph of Kolsi-Mäkelä that the Craft Museum sent me when I first began my research.

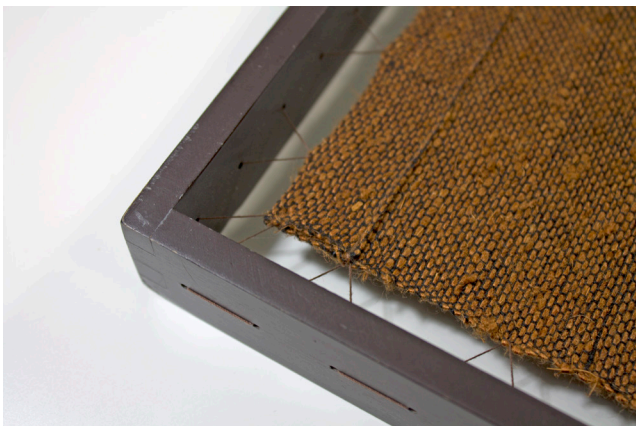
My continuing search to learn more about Kolsi-Mäkelä eventually led me to the **Santa Cruz Handweavers Guild**. The guild's library page showed it held a booklet of Helmi Vuorelma's coverlets with designs by Kolsi-Mäkelä. After emailing with the guild's librarian, I was graciously granted access to the book. When the guild began deaccessioning some items, the librarian remembered me and sent an additional coverlet design booklet.

Part of the original set of images sent by the Craft Museum of Finland was a design sketch for a double weave piece *Hedelmä (Fruit)*. I later purchased my own example of the textile from a seller in California. I have since found five more examples of the design in varying lengths for sale online.



It is unclear how many pieces of each design were produced, but I have come across several works in two or three different colorways in my research. Works produced and sold by Helmi Vuorelma had two different tags attached to them. One, with the design name, the designer, and company name and city, was fixed to the work with an adhesive. Many of these tags have fallen off or have been removed. A woven production tag was also attached, this one stitched on making it more likely to remain.

My own local handweaver's guild was interested in my initial research findings. A longtime member had learned to weave as a student in Finland. I shared the textiles I had collected with her and other members of the Swedish/Nordic weaving study group and they encouraged me to keep up my search. I've been the beneficiary of the generosity of the textile community, locally, nationally and internationally. The sharing of information, resources and enthusiasm convinced me that my research interests had wider value.



Top: **Maija Kolsi-Mäkelä** *Tähtisade*, transparent weave, linen, wool. 12.5" x 12" Photo: Mandy Pedigo.

Middle: **Maija Kolsi-Mäkelä** *Pim Pom 11* (detail of Helmi Vuorelma Ltd.'s textile tags), transparent weave, linen. 14.25" x 14.25". Photo: Mandy Pedigo.

Bottom: **Maija Kolsi-Mäkelä** *Pim Pom 11* (detail), transparent weave, linen. 14.25" x 14.25". Photo: Mandy Pedigo.

Right page: **Maija Kolsi-Mäkelä** *Pim Pom 11*, transparent weave, linen. 14.25" x 14.25". Photo: Mandy Pedigo.





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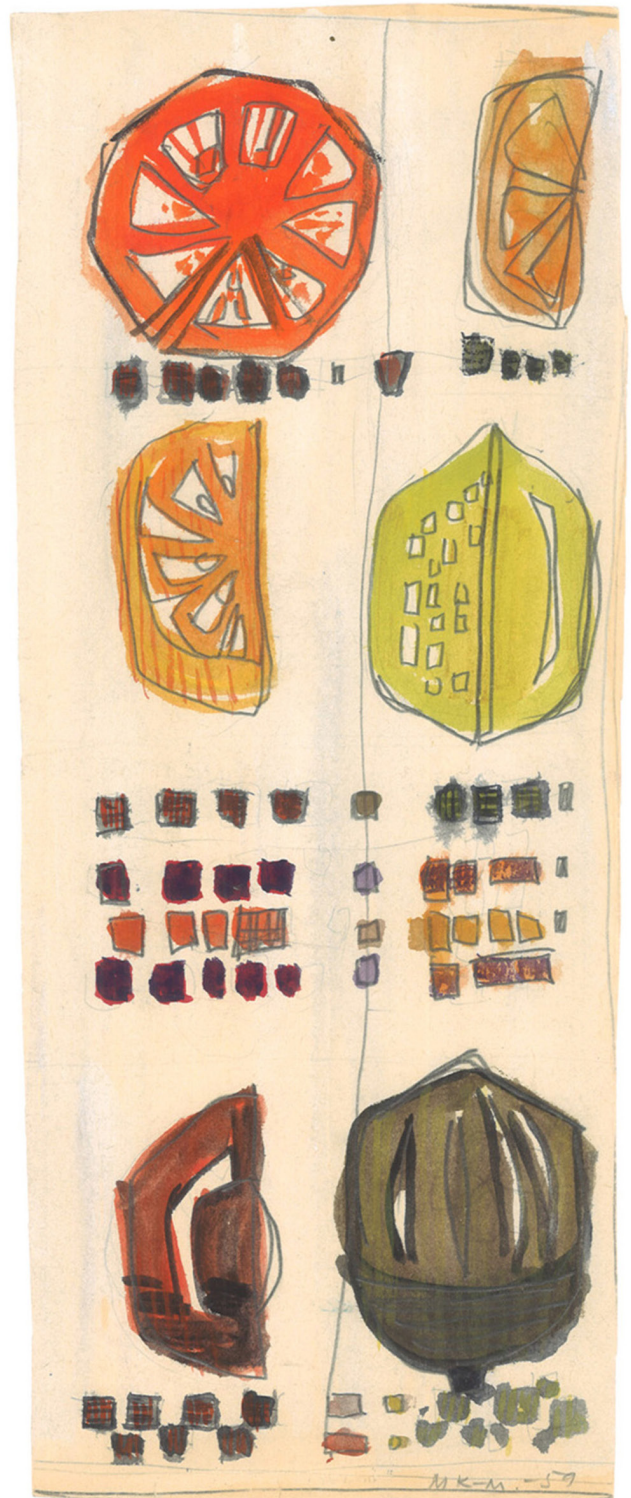
I also shared my research with my professors in graduate school. As a result, I kept getting the question—why? Why are you so drawn to Kolsi-Mäkelä’s work? Why are you interested in Finnish textiles? In my quest to understand the impulse towards the work I made and collected, I renewed my search into my own family history. The answers were there waiting for me.

I am the great-granddaughter of Finnish immigrants; I am named for my great grandmother. As sometimes happens in immigrant families, traditions related to our ancestry were not passed down. Through my genealogy research, I found a cousin who has a lot of the information that I was lacking. Nature is at the very heart of Finland. It is embedded in Finnish culture and could be found in the translation of our family surname Kestilä, “the land endures.” My mother taught me from an early age to love the land and to seek out nature. These lessons guide my own artistic expressions and helped to form the bond I developed with nature.

In my final year of graduate school, based on the support of my MFA thesis committee, I applied for a Fulbright grant to Finland to conduct research at the Craft Museum of Finland. While my first attempt was not successful, I have not given up my goal of studying in Finland. The museum is working on processing its various archival holdings and I would love to be given access in order to answer some of the many questions I still have about Maija Kolsi-Mäkelä.

My attraction to Kolsi-Mäkelä’s work is, in part, because of its links to a culture that I feel deep within myself. It was her work that inspired me to learn more about textiles, which ultimately led me to graduate school and then to search out my own family’s story. It felt very much like she was my silent mentor through graduate school and remains so today. From a \$1.50 book to an MFA in textiles, it has already been quite a journey and I’m only just beginning. In 2018, I completed my degree and also found my very own *Iltarusko* in a gallery in Sweden. No doubt there are other examples of Kolsi-Mäkelä’s work in homes and in resale shops just waiting to be discovered.

—Mandy Pedigo is an artist and writer living in St. Louis, Missouri. She will travel to Finland in the summer of 2020 for her research. Follow her travels on her website mandypedigo.com



Left page: **Maija Kolsi-Mäkelä** *Iltarusko* with **Mandy Pedigo**, doubleweave, linen, 47" x 45".

Right page: **Maija Kolsi-Mäkelä** design sketch for *Hedelmä (fruit)* 1959. Photo: The Craft Museum of Finland Archives.