



# CLAIRE ZEISLER

**Whitney Museum of American Art**

**December 14, 1984 – March 10, 1985**

Claire Zeisler had her first one-artist show at the age of fifty-nine. The present exhibition — her first in an East Coast museum — will conclude shortly before her eighty-second birthday. Though she acknowledges the pleasure of professional recognition, Zeisler has never wanted the public, critics, art dealers, or the thought of sales to disturb her freedom (she even refused to sell any work out of her first show). In her own words, she is “a primitive woman in a very sophisticated society.”

Zeisler has been deeply engaged in art since her childhood art classes. From 1930 on, she began to acquire objects of the broadest possible range. Her lakeside Chicago apartment holds masterpieces of twentieth-century painting and sculpture (Klee, Picasso, Miró, Moore, Calder, and Rauschenberg lead the list) as well as material objects from many tribal cultures — the latter group dominated by over three hundred American Indian baskets. A 1949 Calder mobile stands a few feet from a decorated meat hook from a Sepik River, New Guinea, tribe; this interaction is further charged by an adornment-encrusted denim motorcycle jacket lying atop a nearby chair. For Zeisler, the collection functions as a self-portrait, a visual laboratory, and a source of beauty.

Zeisler's creative involvement with art began after 1943, when she started taking courses with the immigrant European artists Alexander Archipenko and László Moholy-Nagy. She produced a few small, non-objective sculptures. But it was her instruction with Bea Swartchild, a Chicago weaver to whom she was drawn by her abiding interest in threads and textiles, that channeled Zeisler's artistic activity.

All through the 1950s Zeisler busily produced modest, functional loomed weavings, mostly table place mats and apparel fabrics. By 1961, she began to weave experimentally — to employ fiber as a legitimate medium for high art. The inclusion of her work in a 1963 New York show, “Woven Forms,” gave her national attention. She immediately emerged as a major force in the art of fiber in America.

Zeisler was the senior member of a trio of vanguard American form makers in fiber. Along with Lenore Tawney and Sheila Hicks, she reshaped an artistic medium that had been limited by the loom to flat, wall- or floor-mounted productions. Among these traditional weavings, only tapestry was recognized as art — if it followed compositions designed by established painters. All other fiber work was regarded as functional craftsmanship. But by the late 1920s, the non-objective, loom-woven fabrics of the Bauhaus-oriented weaver Anni Albers began to be considered as independent works of art. Conventional attitudes, however, were difficult to change, and through the early 1960s the classification of fiber as art was generally unacceptable to critics and artists alike.

Around 1960, the possibilities of loom-produced weaving seemed depleted. A gestural, expressionist impulse had overtaken art, and artists working with fiber were likewise seeking a greater freedom and scale for their medium. Adopting new techniques, Zeisler, Tawney, and Hicks produced free-form, free-hanging, and then free-standing configurations of fiber in the 1960s. These initial innovations treat the medium more fluidly. Zeisler's first non-loom work followed the double- and triple-weave systems of the ancient Peruvian textiles she had collected. She used these multi-layers of weaving but also left some individual strands unwoven. By 1962, she maintained that “wall hangings should express what the material dictates.... Therefore I find interest in transparency, opaqueness, stuffed areas, pockets, splitting areas to produce vertical ribbons or loose end effects.” What Zeisler produced moved beyond the realm of fiber and became sculpture.

Along with Tawney and Hicks, Zeisler started showing these new works in Europe in 1964. She quickly developed a greater reputation and following there than she had in America. Her works were purchased by European museums at least a decade prior to such support in the United States. As Zeisler observed firsthand, fiber was accorded a more

serious response as an art form abroad, and European artists worked with the medium in more experimental and ambitious ways.

*Purple* and *Oriental* (both 1962) were included in Zeisler's first European exhibition. *Purple* embodies her color innovations — assertion of shape beyond the traditional loomed rectangle and characteristic buildup of depth. Like *Oriental*, it substitutes isolated strands and embroidery for traditional loom weaving. In keeping with the broad range of Zeisler's visual culture, *Purple* evokes the shape of a Japanese *samisen* (stringed instrument) and *Oriental* adapts Navajo design motifs.

In 1965, while in New York City, Zeisler met the Haitian assistant of the weaving instructor with whom she was briefly studying. He taught her various knotting techniques and thereafter the square knot and its variations structured her pieces. This knot gave her thread greater muscle: concurrently, she began to use a heavier fiber. When the square knot was compounded, walls of fiber could be built and individual strands attached. These "walls" were to play an essential part in the large-scale pieces Zeisler started to produce around 1967–68 — pieces made possible by the knotting technique and inspired by the large scale of European fiber art.

For the fabrication of these big new pieces Zeisler employed assistants and established, at the instigation of Sheila Hicks, a separate workshop nearby. With Zeisler's personal guidance and intricate written instructions, these assistants have since made all her large pieces. The improvisation of *Purple* and *Oriental* was replaced in the new knotted pieces with strict preformulation. This fabrication process enabled her to perfect her technique and her work became much simpler, more straightforward in its presentation of sculptural mass. As she later explained, "The content of these pieces came from wanting to give the threads a shape.... They were not just the means to an end, but they were the end." Zeisler soon employed metal armatures, as in *Rosemary* (1968), to keep the pieces upright and rigid, supporting the cascade of strands and sur-



*Oriental*, 1962

rounding spills that define her art. She traces this aspect of her work to her affection for her childhood nurse, who “had such long hair that she could sit on it.... When I was a good little girl, she allowed me to comb and brush her hair. I think all my pieces came out of that.” Zeisler considers this “fall of hair” her trademark, “the most creative thing I’ve done.” The spills injected an arbitrariness into Zeisler’s precise formulas. But the gravitational flow is also what the material wants to do: to pour forth unencumbered and uncut, to be itself. Central to Zeisler’s redefinition of art in fiber is the restoration of the material to its natural state.

Zeisler’s work of the late 1960s parallels developments in post-Minimalist sculpture. The fixity of metal and wood was being eschewed for the flux and pliability of fiber, plastic, and other novel artistic media. Cloth, rope, wire, and felt were frequently employed in geometric configurations that stressed material content above any clearly personal or expressionistic treatment. The artists who worked with these new media never considered themselves to be involved with craft, and their achievements, unlike Zeisler’s, were accepted as sculpture. Yet when Zeisler was given a retrospective at The Art Institute of Chicago in 1979 it was within the Textile Department, not the Department of 20th-Century Painting and Sculpture.

Zeisler’s *Red Preview* (1969) highlights the new formal features of her art, even as it denies a classification as craft. *Red Preview* is made of red-dyed jute, the first fiber Zeisler chose for her large, post-1967 pieces. Red, for Zeisler, is female and the color and essence of life. It has never been employed to such rich effect as in *Red Preview*, where a sequence of compounded square knots creates a pair of curved facing walls on either side of the central cascade. While acknowledging the vaginal configuration that results, Zeisler contends that the shape emerged more from her desire to create deep flanges.

Unlike the wall-anchored *Red Preview*, the

black-dyed *Rosemary* (1968) (named after the movie *Rosemary’s Baby*) stands on its own. *Stela I*, of a decade later, is an even more ambitious free-standing figural shape of the type that characterizes much of Zeisler’s later, large-scale work. *Stela I* also uses hemp, which by the late 1960s became Zeisler’s primary fiber. Though it does not take dye, hemp is sturdier and less susceptible than jute to material fatigue. Colored threads are wrapped around the strands to introduce other hues. To Zeisler, *Stela I* is like a tombstone and she aptly titled it (and another piece) after the Greek word for a stone or slab grave marker.

Following a group of clustered, serpentine works of the late 1970s, none of which could be included here, Zeisler introduced the relatively flat Totem series. The central, hose-like coils of *Totem II* (1978) braid simply. Made of nine walls of knotted sequences, these coils alternate forward and back, terminating in cascades of massed threads that flow like jets of water. *Totem III* (also 1978) refines and broadens these devices by incorporating multi-color — synthetic thread wrappings of blue and red — and treating the forms as interdependent elements. This piece particularly recalls the origins of Zeisler’s prime motif in the long fall of her governess’ hair.

While Zeisler’s assistants executed these big pieces, she worked privately on an intimate scale. Miniatures like *Page I, Chapter I, Dots and Dashes I, Fragments and Dashes*, and *A Message for the Oddball* were made more as objects than as manifestations of fiber and process. They are artistic “ad-libs,” as improvisational as the big pieces are planned. They keep her creatively active while traveling, talking on the phone, or watching T.V. There is always a miniature at her bedside to work on before she falls asleep or when she gets up. These little pieces are shields from boredom, outlets for obsession. Zeisler calls them her “handwriting.” They can take the form of stitched, stacked, folded, clustered leather





*Fragments and Dashes*, 1978–80

fragments, or wound, beaded, and button-hole stitched or fringed coverings for treasured objects — the beloved stones, shells, and fragments found and claimed on her frequent lakeside walks and elsewhere. Zeisler's humor often emerges in these private pieces, with their finicky swags, regimented slither, and languid pile-ups. Her miniatures manifest their maker's sly and often titillating wit. Zeisler's friend the critic Dennis Adrian described *A Message for the Oddball* as "dinosaur gallstones." At the same time, the "miniatures" share with the tribal art that Zeisler has gathered about her a magical will to be, regardless of the considerations of art.

Following her 1979 retrospective at The Art Institute of Chicago, Zeisler became much more attentive to the interaction of her pieces and began to install her works as environments. She also accepted commissions for the first time. While conceding the drawbacks of working directly with others, she was inspired by the opportunity to assert greater control over how her pieces would be seen.

In 1983 and 1984, in preparation for the Whitney Museum exhibition, Zeisler produced four new works. While new motifs and colorations characterize these large pieces, they enlist her three basic modes of construction: free-standing, wall-anchored, and ceiling-hung. For color, the natural hemp strands are, as usual, wrapped with thread. Dark and light blue join red to outline the structure of her

forms. The armatures of the complementary *Red Arch* and *Tri-Color Arch* are exposed, not located within and covered as in earlier works. Nearly equal in height and width, shape and coloration, these two pieces are, for Zeisler, male (blue) and female (red) counterparts.

Zeisler's predilection for multipart pieces is evident in the thick, flanged *Doublewall Triptych* and the giant, braided *High Rise* (which she had originally conceived in two parts). *Doublewall Triptych* contains the rectangle, circle, and triangle. It is rectangular in its contour, curved at its spill base, and triangular in the three-sided slit above its red-wrapped coil. Bigger and even bolder than *Red Preview*, *High Rise* is Zeisler's most demonstrative acclamation of her affection for red and a giant version of the late 1970s serpentine coils. Beginning with 50 strands of 30-foot lengths of hemp, her double-sided braids thicken in sections that finally build up to 368 strands.

In the past quarter century, Zeisler has adapted a function-based material to artistic abstraction. Yet she has also created works that inseparably interlace materials with process. Her transformation of fiber imbues it with deep emotional content, wherein thread is associated with human hair. Zeisler's art takes a material long identified as woven and functional and made it stand as sculpture.

Patterson Sims  
Associate Curator, Permanent Collection

## Works in the Exhibition

Dimensions are in inches; height precedes width precedes depth, unless otherwise indicated. Multipart pieces and those with spills can be variably installed. In these cases, dimensions given represent maximum height or width.

### *Oriental*, 1962

Raw silk, tapestry weave with crocheted ends, 86 x 14½

Collection of Katten, Muchin, Zavis, Pearl, & Galler, Chicago

### *Purple*, 1962

Silk, 48 x 20

Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Stanton A. Friedberg

### *Rosemary*, 1968

Jute and wool on steel armature, 60 x 48

Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago;  
Gift of Mrs. Robert B. Mayer

### *Red Preview*, 1969

Jute, 96 x 72 x 40

The Art Institute of Chicago;  
Gift of Claire Zeisler

### *Dots and Dashes I*, 1970–76

Mixed media, twenty elements,  
each 1 to 6½ high

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. E. A. Bergman

### *A Message for the Oddball*, 1970–76

Cotton thread over styrofoam, six elements,  
each 3½–7 diameter

Collection of the artist, courtesy Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

### *Page I*, 1975

Natural chamois, 4 x 10¾ x 6

Collection of Mrs. Leonard Horwich

### *Chapter I*, 1976

Leather, 4¾ x 18 x 9½

Kent State University, Kent, Ohio;  
James A. Michener Collection

### *Stela I*, 1977–78

Hemp and wool, 66 x 48 x 48

Collection of the Lincoln National Corporation, Fort Wayne, Indiana

### *Totem II*, 1978

Hemp, 120 x 12 (top)–36 (bottom)

Collection of the Charles Levy Circulating Company, Chicago

### *Totem III*, 1978

Hemp and synthetic fiber, 108½ x 12  
(top)–144 (bottom)

Collection of the artist, courtesy Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

### *Fragments and Dashes*, 1978–80

Mixed media, twenty elements, each  
1–6½ high

Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago;  
Special Purchase Fund in honor of the  
artist's birthday

### *Red Arch*, 1983

Hemp and synthetic fiber, 72 x 11 (top)–44  
(bottom)

Collection of the artist, courtesy Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

### *Doublewall Triptych*, 1983–84

Hemp and synthetic fiber: central element,  
81 x 12 (top)–48 (bottom); and two side  
elements, 81 x 12 (top)–48 (bottom)

Collection of the artist, courtesy Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

### *High Rise*, 1983–84

Hemp and synthetic fiber, forty-four elements  
installed in three groupings, 152 x 144 x 60

Collection of the artist, courtesy Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

### *Tri-Color Arch*, 1983–84

Hemp and synthetic fiber, 74 x 11 (top)–58  
(bottom)

Collection of the artist, courtesy Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

Born Claire Block, April 18, 1903, Cincinnati, Ohio. In 1921 marries businessman Harold Florsheim and moves to Chicago suburbs; they have two sons and a daughter. Divorced in 1943, she moves into Chicago. Marries Ernest Zeisler, a doctor, in 1946. In 1966, four years after his death, she makes the first of several extended trips which, over the next decade, take her to Central America, West Africa, India, the South Pacific, Afghanistan, Japan, and Southeast Asia.

In the 1950s, Zeisler produces functional, loom-woven fabrics. Her career as an artist starts in 1962 with off-loom weavings that evolve into major free-form, and then free-standing, pieces. These woven sculptures, simple yet dynamic in composition, use the square knot for structure and consist mainly of cascades of individual fiber strands. In recent years, Zeisler explores an alternative form of expression in miniature, wrapped object arrangements.

One-artist exhibitions: The Chicago Public Library and The Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago (1962), Richard Feigen Gallery, Chicago (1968), Hadler Galleries, New York (1976), The Art Institute of Chicago and Moore College of Art, Philadelphia (1979), The Saint Louis Art Museum and California State University, Fullerton (1980), and Loyola University, Chicago (1984).



Claire Zeisler in her apartment, 1981

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*High Rise* and *Tri-Color Arch* by Mary Jane Toles;  
*Fragments and Dashes* by William Bengston.

Cover: Detail of *High Rise*, 1983-1984