

MODERN ART
OXFORD

Cover image 1: Hannah Ryggen, *A Free One / En Fri*, 1947-8. Courtesy Nordenfjeldske Kunstindustrimuseum / Museene i Sør-Tromsdeg. Photo: Anders S. Solberg/Nordenfjeldske Kunstindustrimuseum. © Hannah Ryggen / DACS 2017
 Cover image 2: Hannah Ryggen, *6 October 1942 / 6. Oktober 1942*. Courtesy Nordenfjeldske Kunstindustrimuseum / Museene i Sør-Tromsdeg. Photo: Anders S. Solberg/Nordenfjeldske Kunstindustrimuseum. © Hannah Ryggen / DACS 2017

This is a reproduction of Robert Rauschenberg's 1985 tapestry, 'The Great Wave'. The piece is a complex, multi-layered abstract work. It features a central figure in a blue and white patterned garment, surrounded by various faces and figures in a rich palette of reds, oranges, yellows, and blues. The tapestry is framed by a dark blue border. The style is characterized by bold, flat colors and a sense of movement, reminiscent of the Japanese woodblock print 'The Great Wave off Kanagawa' which it references. The composition is dense and layered, with many small, repeating motifs and figures. The overall effect is one of vibrant energy and intricate detail.

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▲ The only exceptions were occasional government and university commissions in Oslo towards the end of her career.

For many years the Ryggen family made their living as subsistence farmers in a remote rural community in Norway. From her home in Ørlandet (five hours by steamboat to the closest city, Trondheim), she travelled widely and was included in significant international

making heritage and its focus on current affairs.

Hannah Ryggen, *Blood in the Grass*, 1966. Courtesy KODE-Art Museums of Bergen. Photo: KODE/Dag Fosse. © Hannah Ryggen / DACS 2017.

... every man and woman, whether rich or poor, ought to be raised capable of two things: producing their own food and supporting themselves. It is an indignity that some serve others. Everyone should work, no one should be above another. Equality for all mankind. We are all flesh and blood, just the same.

- Hannah Ryggen, 1942

Hannah Ryggen (1894–1970) was an artist whose passionate belief in equality found powerful expression through her work and life. She is celebrated for her monumental tapestries responding to political turmoil in her lifetime, from the economic crisis of the early 1930s to the Vietnam War in the 1960s. Her commitment as a member of the Communist Party informed how she lived, the means of production for her work, and the subject matters she chose.

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 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

3. *Death of Dreams / Drømmedød*, 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 Herrman 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.

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 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 Thiis: “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 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.’

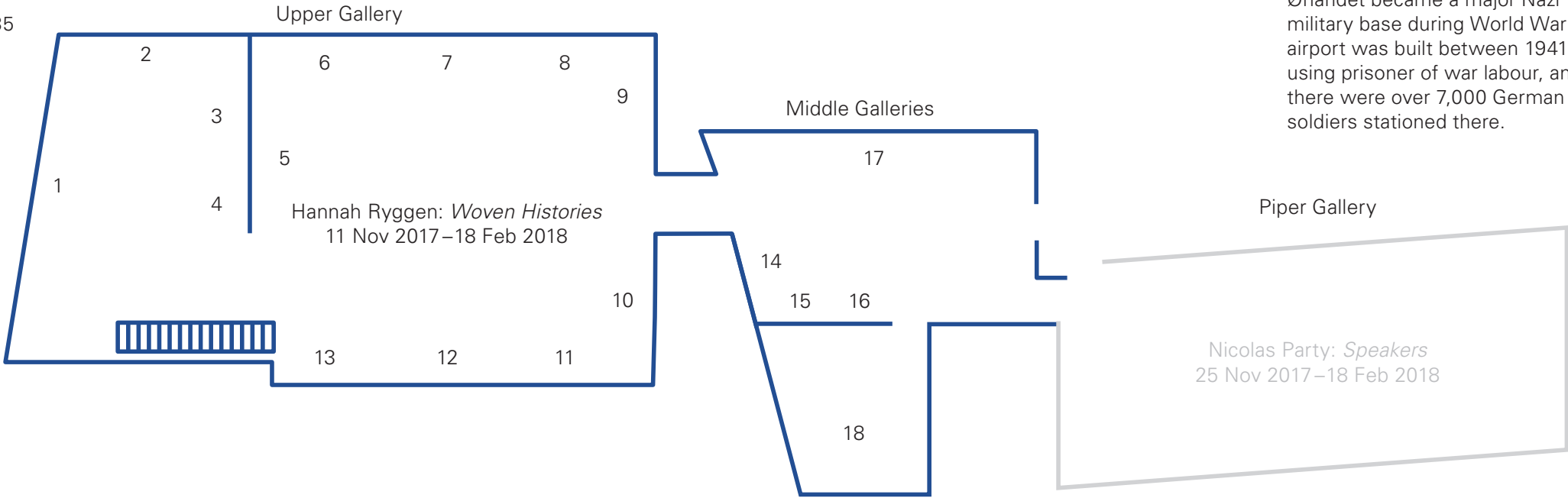
7. *Grini*, 1945

The Trondheim region was of strategic importance to the Germans. Ørlandet 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.

The Ryggens routinely witnessed acts of torture and the movement of starving captives past their home en route to forced labour. While Ryggen would flagrantly display her anti-fascist tapestries on her washing line for the German soldiers to see, she was paid no attention. Instead, her husband Hans was arrested as a political dissident, and sent to Grini prison camp.

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



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

10. *Poem by T. S. Eliot / Dikt av T. S. Eliot*, 1952

The bottom third of this tapestry contains a Norwegian translation of these lines from *Four Quartets*:
Who then devised the torment? Love. Love is the unfamiliar Name Behind the hands that wove 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.

13. *Blood in the Grass / Blod i gresset*, 1966

‘America 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. Almost precisely thirty years since learning of Italy’s League Nations-violating invasion of Ethiopia in the very same newspaper, *Dagbladet*’s

coverage once again provided Ryggen with the subject matter for what was to become her final large-scale political tapestry, completed in 1966, just four years before her death at the age of 76.

Middle 1

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 / Självporträtt* , 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.

Middle 2

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

Please ask our Visitor Assistants if you have any questions.



Upper Gallery

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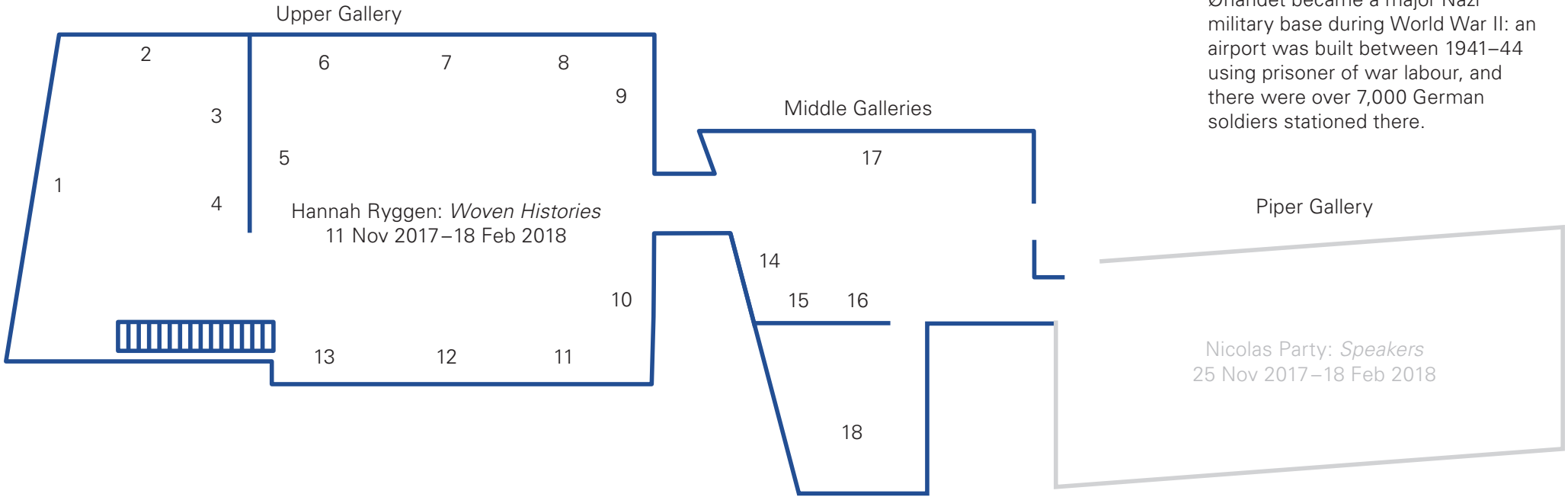
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