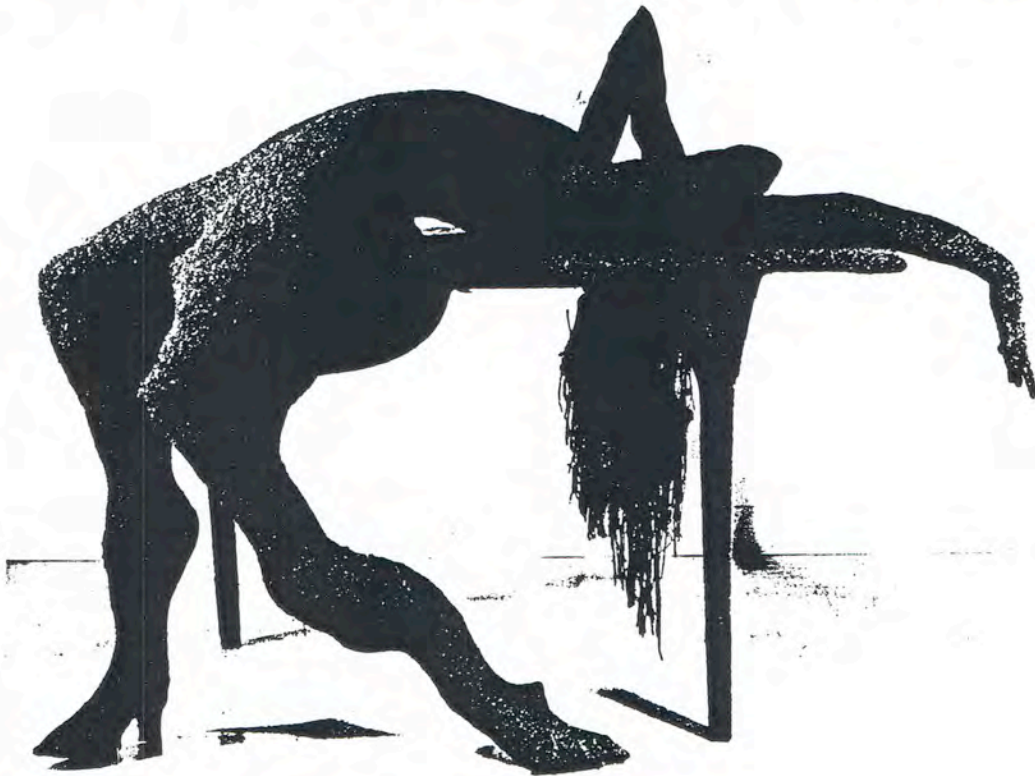


Levi-Strauss, Monique. "Dorothea Tanning: Soft Sculptures." *American Fabrics and Fashions* 108 (Fall 1976), pp. 68-69.

DOROTHEA TANNING SOFT SCULPTURES



Semi-recumbent figure in soft sculpture

DOROTHEA TANNING: SOFT SCULPTURES



Andreas Tanning emigrated from Sweden to the United States when he was seventeen. Later, he married Amanda, also of Swedish descent. Of their three daughters, Dorothea, the second, was born in Galesburg, Illinois.

Amanda had wished to become an actress or a singer. Now she hoped one of her daughters would accomplish her dream. Dorothea was given lessons in declamation; but, secretly, the child started drawing and, at the age of seven, she *knew* she would become a painter.

Slightly rachitic, the adolescent Dorothea still looked like a child; instead of playing and dancing with young people her age, she pre-

ferred going to the movies. While employed at the public library of Galesburg she discovered the enchantments of reading and marvelled over the illustrations of Tenniel, Parrish, Beardsley.

At twenty, she said good-bye to Knox College, to the public library and went off to Chicago. For two weeks she attended an art school in the evening. She could learn everything, just by looking. Certainly, no one can teach you how to become an artist!

Dorothea had to earn her living; she made drawings for advertisements, posed for her artist friends and animated puppets at the World Show.

Then in New York she led a bohemian life. San Francisco and back to New York. Failures. Gropping in

the dark. But always the deep seated belief that some day *other* realities would spurt out of her fingers onto the canvas.

She had to accept odd jobs, some hilarious. Being an extra at the Metropolitan Opera of New York in *La Traviata*, *Lakme*, *La Boheme*, *Orphee*. When informed, her mother was delighted. But little did she know her daughter started 'work' at ten to nine every evening, jumped into a smelly costume and went to her assigned place on the stage and waited. The curtain would go up. Music. Dorothea, like the other extras, had to wave her arms for ten minutes and leave the stage, get back into her own clothes; she would then receive two miserable dollars from a small fat man standing at the exit door.

When she arrived in Paris, in 1939, Dorothea believed she had reached

her earthly Nirvana, but the city was paralyzed, inhabitants had fled, war threatened. Bearing letters for Van Dongen, Picasso and Max Ernst, she could not get in touch with them. War broke out and via Stockholm she returned to New York where she worked for a publicity agency, drawing ads.

It was Max Ernst who gave her the opportunity to paint the way she really wanted. Through him she met the French surrealists, exiled in New York during the war. Dorothea and Max married. They first lived in Sedona, Arizona, then, in 1952, they settled in France. Max Ernst died in Paris last April.

Dorothea Tanning has shown her paintings, and lately her sculptures, in New York and many European cities where she is known as one of the finest contemporary American artists.

An Interview by Monique Levi-Strauss

Q. *Your earlier paintings, your actual sculptures, show an affinity to cloth. Like human hair, dog's hair, flames and feathers, cloth brings to the surface some secret inner tensions. Do you agree?*

A. Yes. I've always been excited by a piece of woven cloth. Whenever I think of weaving I include knitting which is really another procedure to achieve the same desired result. Something ancient and sensuous rises in me to greet and touch and manipulate this first of man's refinements—first of his inventions not devoted to survival. If there is such a thing as a felicitous relation, master-slave, well, it's the certainty that the cloth will bend to your will, that it will take the form that you have, in your imagination, destined it to take. It's supple, sly, always moving, often smiling, in fact something of an enchanter. I am always amazed at the weavers' inventions. There are such myriad varieties of woven stuffs, from coarse hemp (not to be despised for many reasons) to the most ephemeral Egyptian cottons. How beautiful they must have been, those marvelous structures, so formalized, of folds and pleats that they devised to adorn the human body. They could not have achieved this without their diaphanous weavings, don't you think?

Q. *Yes, I have thought the same thing. Is there a period of the past with which you identify as a person?*

A. Over the years I have dreamed ardently of other periods, past centuries, and have wasted long hours imagining life in some former time. You wonder how the food would have been, what the games were and the music and the books—would I have possessed a book? Would it have been, most likely, a prayer book? Would I have been able to sing, to embroider, to dance? Would I have painted pictures with water or oil? Would I have written poems, lived in a castle or a farm? What gods would I have been exhorted to worship? What rites, sacred and profane? Would long hair have been the prerogative of men or women? Would our anatomy have been covered; entirely, partially, sketchily? And what deformities would we have been deluded into looking upon as the ideal?

First of all, one must in my case assume an occidental identity. I do not, as the cultists do, play with reincarnation. It would never occur to me to claim a former life as a Sumatran priestess or an Ethiopian slave, to say nothing of Arabian horses, Chinese dogs, Transylvanian wolves. But it has been an engrossing thought that I might have been born in twelfth century England or fourteenth century France. In either case, one would have had to belong to the upper class. Other people were hardly more than slaves and their dress was so undistinguished from their fellows in other centuries and countries as to be quite without interest. Thus, in earlier times, handsome fabrics were a luxury and so restricted to princes, priests and potentates.

Q. *Then, perhaps, it's just as well that we live in the present. Have you created new textiles? Prints?*

A. If my preoccupation were not already mobilized by other sorts of creation, I would certainly want to invent a cloth. Once, when I was a schoolgirl, I painted a border (if my memory serves, it was rather cubist, Kandinsky style) on a party dress. My schoolmates found this very queer and almost disagreeable, as an impulse. In any case, it is the closest I ever came to designing a print.

Q. *But you have created ballet costumes, haven't you?*

A. Yes, costumes and scenery for several ballets in New York and London. There was a wonderful moment, it was when I was designing a costume for a Balanchine ballet, I dipped my brush in orange paint and dotted in some tiny flowers on a waistcoat, supposedly 1830s period. Imagine my awe when visiting the costume maker's atelier I saw gentle needle women bending over yards of satin stretched on a frame, embroidering my little orange flowers!

Q. *Many creative people design for themselves. Does this apply to you?*

A. Indeed, I used to design most of my clothes. It seemed to me then that one's external assembling is an important part of one's poetic identity, that in a sense, to be faithful to your true image you must bear its aspect. At one time I haunted 'thrift shops' finding very old and beautiful garments, each one testifying to hours and hours of consideration and execution. The mere presence on these rags of handmade laces and embroidery touched me deeply. I wore them, defiantly if necessary, everywhere, at home and abroad. It is perhaps indicative of a *prise de conscience* that today many young people ferret out and wear the same kind of apparel. It doesn't so much point to a mode or infatuation with a period in time, as hint of a nostalgia for innocence, for taking pains over even a minor creation. To me it's a kind of tentative attempt to restore certain values.

Q. *Lots of designers can draw or sketch their ideas, but not all of them could execute their projects. It requires a deep knowledge of cutting and sewing. Do you carry out such steps for the finished product yourself?*

A. Of course, I cut and sew everything I can find that's susceptible to transformation. But that's the constant of any artist, it seems to me, especially if the artist has elected cloth as a material in his most serious and most challenging effort.

Q. *Then this brings us to your cloth, or as some call them, soft sculptures. Knowing that you create them from start to finish I'd like to ask you what they mean to you, how they fit into the context of your work as a painter.*

A. These sculptures represent for me two or three kinds of triumph:
1. the triumph of cloth as a material for high purpose.
2. the triumph of softness over hardness—for how can a hard sculpture have the tactile voluptuousness of a soft one.
3. and the triumph of the artist over his volatile material, in this case living cloth.

There is another smaller triumph—that of defining the real meaning of *la haute couture*—for *la haute couture* should mean, a priori, the invention and execution of an object which could not be made or invented by anyone else. It should, like high anything, be a unique and primal object.

Q. *How did you come to make soft sculptures?*

A. I came to this medium while listening to a concert of an avant-garde composer. I was in a state of elation, hearing the inventions he had devised for the ear. It seemed to me then that I should invent more daringly myself, and I naturally thought of woven material as a means; naturally, because I have always felt its innate beauty and magnetism and above all its possibilities.

Q. *Do these soft sculptures take precedence over your painting?*

A. Not at all. I feel they are parallel expressions of the same preoccupations. That is, the sculptures bring into a three-dimensional reality the visions which have all my life lived their two-dimensional lives on canvas. By the way, the paintings are my first love. Their rounder counterparts came later.

Q. *When buying your clothes, do you trust the 'good taste' of one particular couturier?*

A. I have no deep respect for couturiers. Their efforts have nothing to do with the creative process, depending as they do on acceptance or non-acceptance by the public. Whether that public is one rich woman or ten thousand poor ones doesn't alter the premise. As for 'good taste,' I simply don't know what that could be.

The words 'haute couture' have always distressed me. Also the fact that some designer, aided by a great deal of cheap labor and an equally important quantity of money, spent for everything except the actual work, could impose himself on a sophisticated public as a creator of the highest category. Of course the whole phenomenon of modes of dress is a subject for intense reflection.

Q. *Then where do you shop for clothes?*

A. First of all I look for places which, like me, love natural fibers—cottons, wool, silk, linen. Somehow, these places also seem to have a nice feeling for good lines and workmanship (probably being inspired by the materials); they are the little boutiques of the world and one can as easily find them in Sedona, Arizona, as in Cannes, London, or New York. □

Merging contours—the "rounder counterpart" of art

