DOROTHEA TANNING
SOFT SCULPTURES

An Interview by Monique Levi-Strauss

Dorothea Tanning emigrated from Sweden to the United States when she was seventeen. Later, he mar-ried Amanda, also of Swedish de-
scent. Of their three daughters, Dorothy, the second, was born in Galesburg, Illinois.

Andreas Tanning had wished to become an actress or a singer. Now she hoped
her daughters would accomplish her dream. Dorothy was
given lessons in declamation; but,
she was a child started drawing.
At twenty, she said good-bye to
Knox College, the public li-
brary 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
to become an artist!

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

Then in New York she led a bo-
hemian life; San Francisco and back
New York. Forgetting in the
dark. But always the deep seated
belief that some day other realities
would assert 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, La Bohème, Die Fledermaus.

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. Dorothy's like
the other extras; had to wipe her
arms for ten minutes and leave the
stage, get back into her own clothes;
she would then receive two meager
dollars from a small fat man
standing at the exit door.

When she arrived in Paris, in 1936,
Dorothea believed she had reached
her earthly Nirvana, but the city was
paralyzed, inhabited by first
war threatened. Bearing letters for
Van Dongen and Picasso, 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 pub-
licity agency,

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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.

Semi-recumbent figure in soft sculpture
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. It is such a thing as a totem, a religious object to serve as a fociolous relation, master-servant. 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 the form, subdue, shape, always moving, always smiling. In fact something of an enchantment. I am always amazed at the weavers' inventions. There are so many myriad varieties of woven stuffs, coarse, fine, hemp, not to be despised for many reasons to the most ephemeral Egyptian cottons. How beautiful they must have been. 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 tasted in Rome, 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? Like a human being, would I have been exalted to worship? What rites, sacred and profane? Would I have had the prerogative of men or women? Would our anatomy have covered, entirely, partially, sketchily? And what deformities would we have been deluged into looking upon as the ideal?

First of, one must in my case assume an accidental identity. I do not, as the cuttings 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 the richer and almost disappeared, as an instance, in any case, it is the closest I ever came to designing a piece. What is the exact tale you have of creating 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 eyes 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 life. That is to say, 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 ragged handmade lace and embroidery touched me deeply. I wore them, defiantly necessary, everywhere, at home and abroad. It is perhaps indicative of a prise de conscience that today many young people ferret out and wear this same kind of apparel. It doesn't sit much point to a mode of 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 can 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 selected 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, in 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. No 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 life 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 silly and 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.