

FRAME BY FRAME

Modernism, in all its sensual delight

By [Sebastian Smee](#) | GLOBE STAFF FEBRUARY 23, 2016

A bright, tropical humidity comes off this sculpture like steam. The piece, on display at the Museum of Fine Arts, is called “Bamian (Banyan).” It was made in 1968 by Sheila Hicks, one of the greatest — and until recently one of the most grossly underrated — artists of the past half century.

How neatly, and naturally, it divides into three sections. The top third is white wool, crimped and loosely gathered into pony tails. The middle section is an acrylic fabric dyed bright red and tightly bound so that it descends in straight, muscular tubes.

In the bottom third these tight tubes divide and subdivide into kinky threes and fours that loop and dangle down to the floor, and into various hues at the red end of the spectrum: purple, pink, and orange, with little flashes of turquoise and white.

The dangling suggests relaxation. But there is something strenuous and



MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

Sheila Hicks’s “Bamian (Banyan).”

The work's title asks us to make mental connections, find hidden structures. A banyan, of course, is a beautiful tree, a species of fig. It is often described as a "strangler fig" because of the way its roots cling to host trees or structures.

As it ages, it spreads out laterally, and its thick, tuberous branches and glossy leaves are complemented by what are known as "aerial prop roots," which descend vertically from the lower branches to the ground.

How brilliantly — with what invention, simplicity, and grace — Hicks evokes all this!

The banyan is sacred in both the Hindu and Buddhist religions, which helps explain the other part of the title, "Bamian." Hicks is alluding to the town on the ancient Silk Road, where two enormous seated Buddhas in the Greek-influenced Gandaharan style were carved out of sandstone cliffs in the sixth century. (They were dynamited by the Taliban in 2001).

In Hinduism, the god Shiva is frequently depicted sitting in silence under a banyan, which, because of its spreading and multiplying nature, is associated with eternal life. In Buddhism, the tree's tendency to grow over and around other plants is linked with the way we can be overcome by erotic desire.

To look back at the prevailing strains of critically approved art from the 1970s to the 1990s is to be stunned by the insipidity of an avant-garde that, in the ruling forms of minimalism and conceptualism, would deny not only color, texture, and softness but representation, narrative, and usually pleasure itself.

If only, you feel, the era's most ambitious artists had followed the lead of people like Hicks, who were busy taking modernism in directions far more fruitful than the cul-de-sac of a phony and philosophically pinched asceticism. Fruitfulness, as any tree will tell you, depends on sensuous seduction.

BAMIAN (BANYAN)

By Sheila Hicks

At Museum of Fine Arts, 617-267-9300, www.mfa.org

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