



# Noémi Speiser

## 1926–2025

Noémi Speiser (11 August 1926 – 18 September 2025) was a textile artist and a pioneer in the field of off-loom techniques such as braiding, ply-splitting and sprang. Without her interest and work, especially in the field of loop braiding, these techniques would have remained obscure. All further research in that field is based on her methods and analyses.

Although she was born in the UK, she lived most of her life in Switzerland. She began her textile career by studying handweaving, textile design and embroidery. She taught at the Art School in Basel from 1967 to her retirement in 1986. She also taught braiding courses at the Basel Museum of Culture. Her connection to this museum opened doors to the world of braids, where she took on the challenge of classifying textiles stored at the museum. Later, the museum director, Professor Bühlher, facilitated her travel to Japan. She took copious notes, and when she returned to Switzerland, she reproduced what she had seen, pioneering techniques then unknown in Europe.

Noémi's work at the Museum of Culture launched what she herself called "obstinate research on obsolete off-loom fabric-making techniques which were, at that time, regarded as inferior or negligible". She found braids as "the only textile for which you control every single thread". Fuelled by her desire to create order, her independent thinking led her to a solid understanding of the techniques of braiding which she shared with the world. She was a friend of the late Peter Collingwood and they corresponded for many years, discussing terminology and definitions in connection with aspects of braiding, sprang and ply-split braiding. Peter Collingwood included photos of many of Noémi's artworks in his book *The Techniques of Sprang*.

Noémi published *The Manual of Braiding* in 1983 with

a foreword by Peter Collingwood. It was the result of many years of braiding investigations, containing a thorough analysis and description of techniques from all over the world, including Tibet, South America, Japan, and Europe among others. Techniques such as ply-split braiding and loop braiding were presented and explained in detail for the first time outside of ethnographical research. The manual was republished by Haupt Verlag in 2018.

Noémi's work is particularly valuable for its contribution to the understanding of loop braiding. By examining manuscripts from the 15th to 17th

centuries and historical samples of braids, she interpreted the enigmatic directions from handwritten texts, translating them into clear instructions for today's braiders. She made this information available to all through the publication of her books *European Loop Braiding, Part I, II, III, and IV* co-authored with Joy Boutrup, and edited by Jennie Parry, between 2009 and 2012. A further contribution to the topic is her book on *Old English Pattern Books for Loop Braiding* published in 2000.

Haupt Verlag published her last book, *An Annotated Classification of Textile Techniques*, in 2024. In it, she laid out myriad textile structures in an orderly fashion. She wrote "The same structure can be executed in many different ways. In a final structure, the process is lost ... Nonetheless, it is always extremely important to emphasise the essential and to disclose it clearly

and accurately".

Noémi Speiser was a brilliant researcher and instructor. The challenges she posed are to delve ever deeper into techniques and structures, and then to communicate these in a clear, concise manner. Textile researchers are grateful for her contribution to the understanding of textile structures, and braided structures in particular. As a German speaker, she felt that she could have presented her work more clearly



Noémi Speiser (Image: Ferdinando Godenzi)



in German. However, she could converse with English speakers such as Peter Collingwood with whom she discussed her insights into braids.

Perhaps her greatest contribution to the braiders of the world transcends language; for example, her explanatory drawing of eight girls doing a maypole dance. Her concept of track plans, illustrated with many drawings, provided a critical tool for braiding analysts. Track plans offer a way in which to examine and decode braided structures. They make it possible to reproduce braids whose construction methods would otherwise have been buried in history. In her own words, Noémi explained “a track plan illuminates the internal construction of even the most complex braids in a flash”. It is her track plans that are perhaps

her most valuable legacy. Peter Collingwood said it best - in a letter to Noémi on the publication of *The Manual of Braiding* - he wrote: “You have both explored a strange country and provided a foolproof way for those who want to follow”.

### **Acknowledgements**

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*By Carol James*