



# *Tapestry Topics*

## *Feature Article*

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*A Quarterly Review of Tapestry Art Today*

Summer 2004, Vol 30 No 2

## *Critical Issues in Tapestry*

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This paper addresses some of the critical issues facing the tapestry field today in three major areas: higher education, exhibitions, and the art world.

### **Education**

In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century tapestry is essentially no longer taught in US college fiber departments, except for a few exceptions. The truth is that it has never had much of a presence there, except as a small segment in classes concentrating on other techniques. In the 1950s and before, most weaving taught at U.S. colleges was in Home Economics programs, where the focus was on textile science, and functional fabrics for clothing and interior design. As Home Economics departments closed or changed emphasis, fibers courses were often incorporated into Art Departments. In the 1940s the influence of the Bauhaus, with its practice of requiring foundation courses in drawing and design, emerged at Black Mountain College in North Carolina through Annie and Joseph Albers and other former Bauhaus artists. Designing textiles as industrial prototypes, part of the Bauhaus ideal, was incorporated into some fiber programs around that time.

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[Editor's note: This talk was presented at "Outside the Studio: Presenting Tapestry within a Broader Field" a forum and panel sponsored by the American Tapestry Alliance in Denver, Colorado, July 3, 2004. The author has provided a list of the accompanying slides at the end of this article.]

In the idealism of the late 1960s, and the 1970s, finely made functional crafts, including weaving, took on a new importance as environmentalism, ecology and the "back to the land" movement became popular. Handmade crafts represented a rejection of the excesses of the modern world. It was also a time of great fascination with non-Western culture, and many people began to weave at that time, a great number of them self-taught, and inspired by the textiles of other cultures. College fiber departments, experiencing a paradigm shift of sorts, encouraged an eclectic approach to textile research as ancient techniques were "rediscovered" and fiber art for the wall became popular.

The 1960s, a time of great cultural upheaval, also brought major changes in tapestry throughout the world. The Tapestry Biennials in Lausanne, Switzerland began in 1962 and ended in 1995. While they lasted, they evolved as an important showcase for international tapestry. The first one, instigated by Jean Lurçat was dominated by painter-designed tapestries, but subsequent Biennials rapidly began to show a strong interest in experimentation, as artists from Eastern Europe, the United States and Japan dominated the exhibitions with textiles departing dramatically from pictorial and narrative traditions. These artists utilized a wide range of textile techniques, upgraded the scale of the work tremendously, and began to bring it off the wall into a more sculptural format. Beyond Craft: the Art Fabric (1972) and The Art Fabric: Mainstream (1981), co-authored by Jack Lenor Larson and Mildred Constantine, embraced the new work of the Biennials, and introduced the term "art fabric" to define these textiles which were so different from traditional tapestry.

The artistic revolution responsible for the "art fabric" was in part a reaction against traditional Gobelins and Aubusson tapestry. The textiles of this new movement were very much in the spirit of European Modernism and Abstract Expressionism, as espoused by art critic Clement Greenberg, in that the work appeared to be largely self-referential and focused upon an exploration of materials and form rather than a representation of subject matter in a pictorial way.

Since the 1980s the impetus driving post-secondary fibers education in U.S. colleges and universities has increasingly stressed theoretical models from the fine arts, and as a result fiber work has become more and more concept driven. One of the most significant art trends to influence textiles was Postmodernism, an art movement which rejected the inwardly focused, self-involvement of Modernism to espouse a philosophy that art should become engaged with the major cultural issues of our times. For

fibers practitioners this meant that to the long-standing experimentation with materials and techniques, was added a new focus on creating work which confronted cultural issues such as: gender feminism; domesticity and the repetitive tasks related to women's work; politics; the social and behavioral sciences; material specific concepts related to fiber's softness, permeability, drapability, and so on. (Wilson, 53)

This switch did not, however, mean a return to pictorial formats, since Postmodernism emphasized the wide-open strategies of appropriation, irony, eclecticism, multiculturalism, and an interdisciplinary approach, which meant anything **but** a return to tradition.

The transformation of familiar fiber articles became a frequently used strategy in both textiles and the Fine Arts, and because of the utilitarian and culturally rich history of cloth, ready made fabric articles continue to be used associatively with great success in both fiber and fine art work.

In recent years there has been an increased use of fiber as metaphor, particularly as it relates to the body. Ann Wilson expressed it well in her 1994 *Fiberarts* article "A Plea for Broader Dialogue":

In its likeness to the body, the materiality of fiber as a textural, pliable and absorbent physical substance has tremendous ability to speak to issues of our own humanness - our human vulnerability and fragility in an age of increasing alienation, and an age of biological and ecological threat (Wilson, 55)

And finally, the use of digital technology and jacquard programs have allowed pictorial images to be produced much more efficiently than through the energy intensive technique of tapestry.

## **The Impact on Tapestry of Trends in Fibers Education**

It is relatively easy to be "trained" in the techniques of tapestry. This can happen on a "do it yourself" basis by following instructions in books, or by taking some of the workshops which are offered around the country. What is more difficult is to be "educated as an artist", which is what college

art and craft departments do. Those essential studio foundation courses in drawing and design which teach basic skills as well as how to look at work with a critical eye, are not a part of an education based upon workshops. Of course it is possible to take such courses piecemeal at community colleges or college extension programs, and this is essential to develop a design vocabulary and drawing skills. Unfortunately, this is the path that most people working in tapestry today are forced to take.

Ad hoc courses in foundation skills do not, however, solve an even more serious lack - an education in art and ideas as it relates to placing the work in a conceptual context. Because of the absence of this knowledge, the gap between fiber art and tapestry has continued to widen. As a result tapestry has become more and more marginalized from the center of theoretically based fiber work. Specific conceptual ideas such as those previously described, often bypass those who work in tapestry unless they keep abreast of what is happening in contemporary art and craft. Since curators and jurors are generally looking for work that interprets cutting edge ideas in art and culture, being out of the mainstream has serious ramifications.

One of the most urgent questions facing the tapestry field today is whether its practitioners wish to remain marginalized, or whether they would like to move closer to the center in order to gain more legitimacy. The latter choice will involve changes that may be difficult. It is a particularly thorny issue for ATA to consider, because it was founded not only to promote tapestry, but in a sense to protect its classical form. However, since we live in a pluralistic society, I believe that there is room to promote both traditional and experimental tapestry within the organization, and that to do so will lead to an increase in membership, and more visibility. I suggest the following strategy for accomplishing this:

- I. Listen to the criticisms leveled by tapestry's detractors without being defensive. Examine them for accuracy, and information which can be useful in a constructive way.

The most consistent criticisms are:

- A. The techniques and materials of tapestry are traditional, and do not reflect the spirit of innovation and experimentation typical of art work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Is this true?** Examine your own practices. We have all heard tapestry makers take pride in the use of materials and techniques which have been used for centuries. Why is this? Is it because those are the materials we have been taught are appropriate? Appropriate for what result? Check the last several ATA catalogs and see what materials exhibitors have used. What efforts have **you** made to take risks with materials and technique, and move out of the territory of the traditional into the unknown?

B. With a preference for technique over content, contemporary tapestry makers continue to mimic painting, and more recently photography, and have been left behind as the rest of the fibers world explores concepts in a manner which exploits the unique qualities of fibers, textiles and media-specific techniques.

**Is this true?** To what extent have you investigated the limitations and strengths of the materials you use? How can their weaknesses be turned to strengths, and contribute to the conceptual meaning of the work? Has anyone ever asked you: "Why don't you just paint?"

C. Tapestry has ignored contemporary issues taken on by the fiber and art worlds.

**Is this true?** Are you familiar with current topics being used by artists in the larger fiber or art world? How would you characterize contemporary tapestry in terms of the subject matter being dealt with? What is your work about?

D. You rarely see much of a transformation of materials in tapestry, the hallmark of most good craft and art work.

**Is this true?** Does your process of making include steps beyond or in addition to the standard finishing in order to enhance or alter the appearance of the piece? Why is this important?

E. Tapestry continues to remain an essentially 2-D medium, though the rest of the art and craft worlds have been exploring sculptural and installation

formats for decades.

**This is obviously true**, one only has to look at tapestry exhibition catalogs. But why? What kind of subject matter in tapestry would require a 3-D rather than 2-D presentation?

II. If we acknowledge some of these criticisms as true, and if we wish to affect change, there are ways to facilitate that:

A. ATA is in the position to augment the excellent job it already does in supporting and promoting contemporary tapestry and offering educational events such as this one. It could also sponsor or encourage seminars and study groups to expand the knowledge of its members beyond technical and design arenas.

B. Looking at the criticisms of tapestry as a point of departure, topics of these seminars and study groups could be subjects such as: Contemporary Ideas in Art and Craft, the Tapestry Connection; Looking at Tapestry's History for Conceptual Ideas; Decoration as Subversion: Investigating Conceptual Ideas in the Structure of Tapestry; Materials and Meaning Risk and the Transformed Tapestry; Moving Off the Wall with Tapestry; and so on.

C. Given the dispersal of tapestry artists around the world, and the expense of organizing centralized conferences to present seminars, I would suggest "distance learning" via e-mail and the internet as an ideal means of proceeding. On-line sign-ups at specific e-mail addresses of study group or seminar leaders for particular topics could happen as they do with Complex Weavers' study groups. The study group could make democratically based decisions regarding seminar/group content, readings, structured assignments and evaluation. I could imagine such groups being tremendously exciting in terms of idea generation and what they could do for the field of tapestry.

Reading and discussion would familiarize people with the canons of the larger art and craft field, and would lead to concepts and new approaches for making tapestries which could remove the veil currently obscuring tapestry from curators, collectors and gallery owners.

D. On a local level I strongly encourage artists working in tapestry to form on-going critique groups as a means of obtaining objective feedback about work. Guidelines for proper critique behavior are important in such groups.

Anne Wilson, though she was speaking about the fibers field as a whole, articulated quite accurately the nature of the challenge we face in tapestry:

Some artists are advocates of maintaining a strict separation between the discrete "field" of fiber and other disciplines of art, thinking that without this clear distinction, based on the past, fiber will be lost...Can we not broaden our context to include a much larger picture, a broader picture in terms of cultural issues and positions within the art world? In the language of multiculturalism: How does one maintain the strengths and uniqueness of difference and still be part of the whole? How do we maintain the strengths and uniqueness of the materials, methods, historical precedents, and attitudes of fiber and also be a contributing participant within a larger contemporary art dialogue and/or a larger cultural dialogue? (Wilson, 56)

## **Exhibitions**

Since the 1980s ATA has been a strong force in presenting juried survey exhibitions of its members. The ATA Biennials, **and** the ITNET Exhibitions, both material and virtual, followed the path established by the Lausanne Tapestry Biennials, in presenting a showcase of juried tapestries every two years. The catalogs for these exhibitions document the history of the medium during the last two decades.

It is time, however, to build upon the success of the last twenty years and expand the types of exhibitions sponsored by ATA. The survey exhibition format, though providing the possibility for a relatively large number of individuals to be represented, is not the best format if in depth reviews are hoped for, since one tapestry per artist, in a non-thematic show is difficult to review in depth. Reviews of such surveys tend to be more of a cataloging of work present, than a critical analysis, which places the work within a larger context.

Alternate the survey exhibitions, such as the Biennial, with thematic group shows. Themes could be chosen from the ideas evolving out of the on-line seminars and study groups. Tapestries for exhibitions such as these, would best be chosen by a single curator with a strong sense of the theme and how it could best be represented. Theme shows including more than one piece per artist could result in a very unified exhibition, thus capturing sustained attention from good writers and the general public. Provide prizes or awards which reflect both the diversity of the membership and a decision to reward innovation, as well as tradition.

Outside the umbrella of ATA it is also quite possible for groups or individuals to put together thematic exhibitions which are not necessarily restricted to people working in tapestry. Mix it up, and pair tapestry with other media. Such a practice would also broaden the audience beyond the tapestry world. Depending upon financial resources available, organizers of such exhibitions could self-publish brochures or catalogs, commission writers to produce essays, and do the necessary footwork to attract potential reviewers. The more that tapestry is seen as a contemporary medium engaged with ideas, and in the company of other crafts work, the more credibility it will have.

In terms of attracting writers' attention to the exhibitions, it is important to become familiar with good ones and try to interest them in the concept for the show. If appropriate, writers from outside the usual art/craft milieu could be chosen. Those who really look at the work and provide an intelligent analysis are important for the credibility of the field. Mediocre writing that merely paraphrases the press release or bestows compliments, does nothing to advance the cause of educating the public about tapestry, nor does it qualify as the kind of scholarly discourse which is taken seriously by the art world.

## **Tapestry's position in the art world**

Ever since painters and sculptors formed their own academies and split off from crafts guilds in the Renaissance, there has been a separation of art and craft, or as some say, between the worlds of thought and ideas and the world of labor and the hand.

In an essay by Arthur Danto "Reflections on Fabric and Meaning: The Tapestry and the Loincloth" from New Material as New Media, he quotes Jonathan Brown from Gottfried Semper's 1989 article "The Textile Art":

Nowadays, no artistic medium is less appreciated than the tapestry, which seems to enjoy about the same esteem as second hand clothing. In the Renaissance and Baroque, however, tapestry was the art of kings, prized for its scale and intricate craftsmanship as well as its insulating properties. ...(Today) tapestry as a form of expression has lost contact with the realities of lived life, and it has suffered aesthetically since the contexts in which it could have a use and meaning other than the reduced aesthetic it shares with paintings, have vanished from modern life. As matters stand, they are appreciated only as paintings in an alien medium...(84)

That Arthur Danto, a major and respected US philosopher and art critic, chose to include this quote in his 2002 essay in a major publication, is troubling because it perpetuates stereotypes about tapestry which do not reflect the current state of the field. Sadly, it is probably also a good indication of the extent of the misunderstanding of tapestry in the greater art world.

However, it is Danto's distinction between art and craft which really cuts to the heart of why fibers (and all crafts media) continue to come up against a brick wall in their attempts to gain entry to the citadel of fine art:

...The presence of the hand is of diminishing significance in the visual arts today, as they become increasingly conceptual. I cannot see it disappearing from the concept of craft, however. Craftspersons have sometimes hoped to close the gap between craft and

art by shunning the idea of functionality. But it is hard to see how they can repudiate the presence of the hand. Because of the hand, craft has often carried a political message in its implication of a form of life contrary to that implied by the flawless, uniform products of mechanical manufacture (85).

It is clear from Danto's essay and a multitude of other sources, that modern tapestry **is not currently** accepted in the art world, though many contemporary art fabrics are right on the borderline between art and craft, and a few have gained quasi acceptance as art because of their highly conceptual nature and use of mixed materials. These artists have not necessarily given up using fiber, but they have found ways of addressing its material properties in a manner that is conceptually in tune with fine art practices, something that people working in tapestry have not been able to do.

The question we need to ask is "Does it matter?" What do we expect to achieve in conferred art status: exhibitions in fine art galleries, invitations to show in the Whitney Biennial in New York, reviews in Art in America, money, power? Perhaps it is simply the kind of universal acceptance which means that when you tell someone you are an artist they won't say: "Oh, you're a painter!" If these things are what you long for, the path is difficult and perhaps unattainable. I believe we should instead concentrate on our many strengths, and work on pushing innovation, concept development, a more critical eye about our own work, and a broadened exhibition format. We should stop worrying about whether or not tapestry is considered art. It might also help to remove the adjective from our professional title. To label ourselves in a way that compartmentalizes and separates us off from the greater world is a mistake, and does nothing to increase our visibility outside the world of tapestry. We are **artists** not fiber artists, tapestry artists, or fiberists.

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Wilson, Anne. "A Plea for Broader Dialogue." Fiberarts, Summer 1994: 52-56.

## List of References to Accompanying Slides:

1. *Molecular crimp of wool fiber* (Textiles by Norma Hollen and Jane Saddler. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1955.)

2. *Tablecloth by Margarete Reichardt, tea set by Hans Pzyrembel from the Bauhaus* (Women's Work, Textile Art from the Bauhaus, by Sigrid Wortmann Weltge. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1993 **and** *Upholstery material designed and woven by Ed Rossbach in 1959 at Cranbrook, silk and rayon, twill weave* (Design in American, the Cranbrook Vision, by Judson Clark et al. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1983.

3. *Tablecloth material by Anni Albers, mercerized cotton 23 1/2x28 2"* (Anni Albers, by Nicholas Fox Weber and Pandora Tabatabai Asbaghi. New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1999.

4. *Sheila Hicks in Mexico in 1960 working on backstrap loom* (Beyond Craft: the Art Fabric, Mildred Constantine/Jack Lenor Larsen. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1972)

5. *Detail of Jean Lurçat tapestry*

6. *"Flora" by Robert Wogensky, 4'9.5" x 6'2.75", woven by Tabard Atelier, 1962* (Great Tapestries, the Web of History from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century ed, Joseph Jobé. Lausanne: Edita, 1965.

7. *"Environment, Situation 4, Abakan Rouge II", sisal tapestry and rope (detail, 1970) by Magdalena Abakanowicz* (Beyond Craft: the Art Fabric, Mildred Constantine/Jack Lenor Larsen. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1972)

8. *"Le Demeloir" (detail) 1977, Cotton installation, Sheila Hicks*

9. *"The Twine" by Marijo Yagi, twinning, wild hemp, 1972* (Beyond Craft: the Art Fabric, Mildred Constantine/Jack Lenor Larsen. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1972)

10. *Lausanne Biennale 1977 (foreground) Francoise Grossen (right wall) Sherri Smith Pavillion (left) Marisa Bandiera Cerantola partial view of "Chromatic Structure" (The Art Fabric Mainstream, by Mildred Constantine and Jack Lenor Larsen. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1981)*
11. *"The Red Glove" by Yoichi Onagi, tubular woven tapestry, cotton, 8.5'x8'x4' (The Art Fabric Mainstream, by Mildred Constantine and Jack Lenor Larsen. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1981)*
12. *"Polycloak" by Glen Kaufman, tapestry, weft pile; polyethylene film, nylon, 78" x 48" x 26", 1979 (The Art Fabric Mainstream, by Mildred Constantine and Jack Lenor Larsen. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1981)*
13. *"Gestation Corset" (detail), catnip, mink, metal eyelets, Lacan, "Dora" test by Freud, Christine Lo Faso, 1992*
14. *"Mendings", ground cloth, thread, hair, hand-sewn, 6x7x6 3/4", Anne Wilson*
15. *"Old Glory Shroud," tapestry wedge weave, silk, linen, cotton, nylon, painted warp, 72x126x1", 1992, James Bassler*
16. *"I am the Land", 12.5x50.5x16.5", fiber, paint by Norma Minkowitz*
17. *"Filtered", and detail felt, honey, metal, plastic, 30x540x7", 2002, Joan Livingstone (Portfolio Collection: Joan Livingstone, Winchester, UK: Telos Art Publishing, 2002.*
18. *(Untitled) Quilted and beaded comic bedspread, and detail Mark Newport*
19. *"Domestic Shield I", 26x23", 1993, Lou Cabeen and "Did You Keep Our Secret", photo screen print, stitching, beading, resist dyed linen, 18x13", 1994, Marna Goldstein Brauner*
20. *"Soulskin #2", and detail fabric, dye, Susan Lordi Marker*
21. *glass "table" with tapestry and detail, Shelley Goldsmith*
22. *"Site", wedge weave tapestry, linen and wire, 16"x1"hx32"w, 1998, Sharon Marcus and "To Speak with Threaded Tongue", linen, cotton, bas-relief tapestry, 33x24x1.5", 1995, Christine Laffer*
23. *"Roundedness of Return #1", gingham dress and woven tapestry, 100 x 150 cm, 1996, Sara Lindsay*
24. *"Seam", and detail shaped wedge weave, wool, linen, wire, pigment and medium, 20"hx2-16"w, 2004, Sharon Marcus*
25. *"Monsoon Capital", tapestry, silk, nylon monofilament, 23x23x215 cm, 1999, Shelly Goldsmith*

26. *"Handwork Series: to the Bone, in the blood, from the heart"*, 167 cmx139cm, 1999-2001, Jane Kidd
27. *"Flore I-4"*, (4 slides) Tapestry, wood, 50x50 cm, 1995, Robyn Daw)
28. *"Ornament"* (detail) wood and mixed materials, Sharon Marcus
29. *"Shield"*, and detail shaped wedge weave wool, linen, wire, pigments, mica, and medium, 20hx10-16.5"w, 2003, Sharon Marcus
30. *"Shellal Mosaic"* and detail, Canson paper, paint, wool tapestry, Diana Wood Conroy
31. *"Signs of a Shift"* and detail, bas-relief tapestry, 56.5x22x5", 1999, Christine Laffer
32. *"Seeped"*, felt, suture thread, stain, epoxy resin, pigment, rubber, metal, paint, dimensions variable: this installation 3yx112x96", 1998-2001, Joan Livingstone, (Portfolio Collection: Joan Livingstone, Winchester, UK: Telos Art Publishing, 2002.
33. *"Ha"*, mixed fiber on cotton warp, 148x178 cm, 1995, Yumi Kobayashi-Lindsay