Reflections  Fiber Art History in America

“REFLECTIONS: Fiber Art History in America” is an edited lecture created by Paul J. Smith, Director emeritus of MAD (formerly the Museum of Contemporary Crafts (MCC), American Craft Museum (AMC) - now Museum of Arts and Design (MAD)) It was created at the request of Friends of Fiber Art for a lecture given at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2000 and delivered several times later at other locations in the United States.

Its content reflects on the evolution of Fiber Art in America during the 20th Century. As the subject is so vast it highlights only on selected aspects of history and includes Paul Smith’s personal involvement with exhibitions he organized since 1957 when he joined the staff of the American Craftsmen’s Council (now American Craft Council) until 1987 where he served as director of its museum from 1963 to 1987. For information on Paul J. Smith go to Wikipedia, Paul J. Smith – arts administrator. On the Wikipedia site see reference number 6. This contains a link to the American Craft Council library archives for the Museum of Contemporary Crafts / American Craft Museum where selected digitized documents and catalogs can be easily accessed on line.


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Fiber art today is rooted in the rich history of traditional fiber techniques.
Ethnic textiles from around the world provided an inspiration for fiber artists as they began to explore new concepts during the 50s and 60s.
When one looks back at catalogs and events that took place in the 1930s and 40s, one can conclude that the focus at the time was on functional work with an emphasis on yardage and rugs. However, there were some important studio artists who created tapestries and personal art works.
In 1939 an important exhibition “Decorative Arts” was presented in San Francisco as part of the Golden Gate International Exposition. The textile section was organized by Dorothy Liebes, an important weaver and designer who opened a studio in San Francisco in 1930 and later relocated to New York in 1952. The fiber section Liebes organized for "Decorative Arts" was titled “Modern Textiles”, an appropriate term at that time.
"Modern Textiles" included a broad range of work from Europe and the United States including woven and printed yardage, tapestries, needlework and textiles created for liturgical use. Work by Anni Albers, Ruth Reeves and Marta Taipale was represented.
Tapestries in "Modern Textiles" included work by Matisse, Miro and Picasso. Three needleworks created by Eleanor Roosevelt were also included. The exhibition has great historical importance as it portrayed an impressive spectrum of creativity that documents the state of fiber art in the late thirties.
Dorothy Liebe’s work is known for its dramatic color combinations, textures, and innovative use of materials. Liebes also designed for industry working with Dupont and Bigelow/ Sanford.
Dorothy Liebes created fabrics for interiors and did custom work for many hotels, ships and fashion designers – including Bonnie Cashin, Frank Lloyd Wright and Henry Dreyfus.
Early Schools

In looking back schools played a major role in preserving traditions, fostering professional skills, and nurturing new work. In the early part of the 20th Century a few schools throughout the country included some form of textile training.
In 1920 Lucy Morgan went to rural areas of North Carolina as an apprentice teacher and became interested in reviving traditional weaving. In 1923 she placed looms in homes encouraging a cottage industry. In 1929 she pioneered the founding of the Penland School of Handicrafts which exists today as an important summer school that has maintained a strong fiber focus with distinguished visiting faculty.
Immigrant Influence

In the early years as there was a limited number of experienced people who were qualified to teach, Europe and Scandinavia, having rich fiber traditions, served as an important resource for faculty.

Immigrant teachers brought professional skills and educational philosophies to America. Their work was important, but also they made a major contribution by sharing their expertise and knowledge. This was not only in fiber but other areas of the craft media.
The Cranbrook Academy of Art was founded in 1926 in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.
LOJA SAARINEN, an accomplished designer and textile artist from Finland set up a studio at Cranbrook in 1928 to create work for the new beautiful campus designed by her husband. She also directed the fiber program of the new academy that developed into a mecca for nurturing all arts including fiber art.
In 1937 MARIANNE STRENGELL also from Finland joined the department and became director of the department in 1942 and remained until 1961. Although Marianne’s focus was on designing fabric she also encouraged creation of expressive forms. Today there is a distinguished Cranbrook alumni active in the fiber arts.
In 1933, Anni Albers came to the US with her husband Joseph Albers to be part of Black Mountain College. Bringing the Bauhaus philosophy, they made an important contribution at the acclaimed experimental center that today holds great historical importance.
At Black Mountain Anni taught, created her own work, and shared her knowledge through workshops and writings. In 1949 she became the first textile designer to have a solo exhibition at Museum of Modern Art.
The distinguished San Francisco weaver, Trude Guermonprez, in her atelier cutting a warp with a paddle. Leaves were inspiration for “Leaf Study” tapestry (detail below) in the beige-browns of natural linen and jute.

TRUDE GUERMONPREZ was another important immigrant teacher who came from Europe in 1947 to teach at Black Mountain. After two years she moved to California to become part of Marguerite Wildenhain’s Pond Farm workshop and taught for a year at the SF Art Institute and then in 1952 served for 24 years on the faculty of the California College of Arts and Crafts. The immigrant teachers mentioned were a big influence in fostering fiber art and design.
Other Schools

In the 40s many other art schools and universities offered some form of professional training in fiber. The Decorative Arts at UC Berkeley headed by Lea Miller was important as the only school in the 40s to offer an MFA in weaving.
Ed Rossbach joined the UC department in 1952 and energized the program. His influence was very significant both as artist and educator. Ed and his wife Katherine Westphal must be credited for their major contribution to fiber art today.
NEW STUDIO CRAFT MOVEMENT

As a “new studio movement” emerged before World War, it rapidly expanded after the war.
An important influence was the GI Bill of Rights that helped to develop and expand educational programs in art school and university art departments. Students being part of the art school environment nurtured the emergence of new ideas and concepts for fiber. While some focus on design, the emphasis was on personal expression. Also, with the growing demand for new teachers, many graduates pursued teaching positions rather than explore an independent career.
Like schools many ORGANIZATIONS played an important role through a variety of educational and marketing programs not only for fiber but all the craft media. In the early thirties there were many regional organizations such as Southern Highlands Guild and many state organizations including the New Hampshire League of Arts and Crafts. Emphasis was on marketing as that was the need at the time.
With the expanding regional network there was a need for a national focus. Credit for this must be given to Aileen Osborne Webb, a woman with vision and financial means who took the leadership role in bringing existing organizations together and later developed an impressive series of programs that had a profound effect. In 1929 she formed a modest marketing program in Putnam County, NY.
1940 Mrs. Webb opened America House on Madison Avenue in NY as a marketing center for handmade products. In the upper gallery exhibitions were presented that included a rug and other fiber exhibitions.
To promote activity a magazine was established. Craft Horizons premiered in 1942 with the purpose to communicate activities taking place throughout the country. Some aspect of fiber was represented in each issue. In 1943 Mrs. Webb formed the American Craftsmen’s Educational Council and began to develop a series of important programs. In 1956 she established the Museum of Contemporary Crafts and in 1964 she initiated the formation of the World Crafts Council. Collectively all these efforts had a large effect in promoting the studio movement both here and abroad.
NATIONAL COMPETITIONS

Competitions were very important in the early days to give visibility to craft artists around the country and to identify emerging talent.
Young Americans was an important competition for craftsmen under 30 years of age. ACEC began it in 1950 and continued it annually for several years. In looking at the catalogs there are many established fiber artists who received early recognition such as – Glen Kaufman, Gerhardt Knodel and Alice Parrott.
Designer Craftsmen USA 1953 was another important American Craftsmen’s Council national competition that premiered at the Brooklyn Museum. It had a large fiber section representing work at that time. It traveled to the Art Institute of Chicago and the San Francisco Museum of Art.
In 1960 ACC held a national competition DESIGNER CRAFTSMEN USA.
Fiber works received the top awards with a silver metal given to a hooked rug by Veda Reed.
Second prize was awarded to Ted Hallman.
In the early 50’s there were other important national competition like FIBER, CLAY and METAL at the St. Paul Gallery and School of Art and many other regional competitions. All of these served an important role in giving visibility to artists work when there was not the network that exists today.
In the mid-50’s Mrs. Webb saw the need for a permanent exhibition center and purchased a brownstone next to the Museum of Modern Art.

When the Museum of Contemporary Crafts opened in the fall of 1956 it became the first museum in the US to focus on work in the craft media with continuing exhibitions and educational programs. During the first twenty-five years over 50 one-person, thematic and group exhibitions related to some aspect of fiber.
The Museum of Contemporary Crafts had many small one person shows that gave visibility to new work before commercial galleries emerged in the early seventies.
The Museum of Contemporary Crafts’ exhibitions program illustrated the evolution of new forms of fiber art in the early years. In the late sixties there were several other museums around the country that presented fiber exhibitions. Also, there were important international events such as the Lausanne Biennials and the Triennials in Milan that gave global visibility to new fiber art. The Museum of Contemporary Crafts exhibitions program illustrated the evolution of fiber art in America.
When the MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY CRAFTS opened in the fall of 1956 the first exhibition was “Craftsmanship in Changing World” organized by Thomas Tibbs the Museum’s inaugural director.

Fiber art was well represented with work by thirty two fiber artists including Lea Miller, Anni Albers, Reuben Eshkanian, Mark Adams, Ed Rossbach, and Dorothy Liebes.
CRAFTSMANSHIP IN A CHANGING WORLD (Above, work by Lenore Tawney)

During the first few years, Director Thomas Tibbs established MCC as a professional museum and began modest program in collecting that included fiber works.
In 1959 FIBER, TOOLS and WEAVES was created as an educational exhibit designed to travel with the advice of New York weaver, Lili Blumenau. Forty-two weavers and designers were represented along with an educational component.
From the beginning the Museum of Contemporary Crafts was international in scope – In 1959 CONTEMPORARY FRENCH TAPESTRIES presented work by members of the French Tapestry Association. It included the work of Le Corbusier.
Mariska Karasz, who has made a fine art of embroidery, is guest needlework editor of “House Beautiful Magazine.” Miss Karasz has had two one-man shows at Bertha Schaefer Gallery, nine others in various museums across the country. She exhibited in the Gallery of America House in 1949.

*An artist realizes*  
brilliant new expressions through  
filamental forms

Mariska Karasz was important in bringing new concepts to traditional embroidery. Her work became nationally known through articles featured in House Beautiful and other home magazines. In 1951 she had a show at the Art Institute of Chicago.
In 1961 a memorial exhibition of Mariska Karasz was presented. Mariska immigrated from Hungary in 1913.
The 1960’s was a very exciting era with a return to basics, and a time of seeking new ways of living motivated by young people seeking a new lifestyle. It resulted in a cultural change where anything was possible.

In 1963, it was a challenge to present exhibitions that would give credibility to an area of the arts that had limited national exposure at the time. As a specialized museum being next to Museum of Modern Art, it was a great advantage and the freedom to develop the program allowed staff to respond to what was happening. Most of the exhibitions in the early days of the museum served the purpose of reporting on new work and trends.
WOVEN FORMS in 1963 was the first major show at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts to feature new directions in fiber art in America.
The title and concept was inspired by Lenore Tawney. Her innovative work in the mid-50s broke from tradition and was revolutionary as she produced sculptural forms that were very unique not only in America but in the world.
Lenore Tawney's work was featured on the main floor of the MCC.
WOVEN FORMS included work by Sheila Hicks, Claire Zeisler, Alice Adams, and Dorian Zachai that were presented in the upper gallery. This exhibition brought national and international attention to new fiber art in America. Erica Billitier a curator from Switzerland saw it and created a smaller show at the Kunstgewerbemuseum in Zurich the following year giving exposure of new American fiber to a European audience.
EXPLORING THE NEW

The 60’s explosive environment encouraged experimentation and exploration of the new in every area of the arts. Innovative fiber work emerged out of the intrigue with exploring new concepts rooted in traditional techniques and materials. The result was an emergence of exciting new work.
1965 FABRIC COLLAGE featured a broad range of works.
FABRIC COLLAGE represented work by Lillian Elliott, Alma Lesch, Elizabeth Jennerjahn, Marie Kelly, and Marilyn Pappas. There was also a small exhibit of San Blas appliqués and historical quilts to make reference to tradition.
1967 STITCHING focused on embroidery and included a historical selection section.
The contemporary section of STITCHING featured work by Evelyn Svec Ward (left), and Helen Bitar (right). Also included was work by Lissy Funk from Switzerland, and William Schenk from Holland.
THE MINIATURE TAPESTRY

In 1966 THE MINIATURE TAPESTRY was the first exhibition to focus on small scale work. Later the First International Exhibition of Miniature Textiles was organized by the British Craft Council 1974.
OBJECTS USA was the first major comprehensive craft survey collection that premiered in 1969 in Washington at the Smithsonian National Collection of Fine Art followed by a national tour to 22 museums in the US, and went to 11 countries of Europe.
OBJECTS USA was conceived by Lee Nordness, a New York gallery owner. Having organized ART USA sponsored by Johnson Wax, he convinced them to sponsor a sequel focused on work in the craft media. As he had limited knowledge of the field, he came to the MCC to seek advisory assistance. It resulted in extensive involvement in assembling the collection with the agreement that the museum would receive one third of it at the end of the tour which resulted in 22 fiber works being added to the then small MCC collection. Through the generosity of Johnson Wax most of the balance of the collection was given to other museums in the US who exhibited the show. Of the 250 artists represented 66 were in the fiber section.
Anni Albers (Left) and Ed Rossbach (right)
Ed Rossbach – wall hanging with braided fiber element in plastic tubing
OBJECTS USA

Katherine Westphal – quilted wall hanging – pioneer in contemporary quilting (left), Shiela Hicks – a work from her Moroccan series (center), and Claire Zeisler – large 6 foot tall sculpture (right)
OBJECTS USA
Dominic DiMare (left) and Lillian Elliott (right)
OBJECTS USA

Marilyn Pappas (left), Alma Lesch (center), and Susan Long (right)
OBJECTS USA

Carol Funai (left) and Kay Sekimachi (right)
OBJECTS USA

The collection had a great impact as it was an opportunity to view the vast amount of new creative expressions that emerged during the 1960s.
OBJECTS USA

The national and international press it generated was enormous. “With These Hands” a one-hour film broadcast on prime time national television reached a massive audience. Its national and international tour cultivated much interest in new American work and fostered a serious market and nurtured private collecting.
During the 60s and 70s several thematic shows were presented at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts and American Craft Museum. 1970 CONTEMPLATION ENVIRONMENTS - Many shows in the 60s and 70s reflected social trends of the time.
CONTEMPLATION ENVIORNMENTS

Ted Hallman created a fiber cube (left) and Alexsandra Kasuba made a stretched fabric environment that included a sculptural floor covering by Urban Jupena. Museum visitors were invited to use the spaces to contemplate.
1972 SCULPTURE IN FIBER – featured loom-work as an update of WOVEN FORMS.
Francoise Grossen
B. Neuchâtel, Switzerland

Education:
École d'Arts et Sciences, Neuchâtel, Switzerland, 1963
School of Architecture of the Politechnical University, Lausanne, Switzerland, 1963-64
Degree in Textile Design
School of Arts and Crafts, Basel, Switzerland, 1967
Graduate work with Professor B. Kester
University of California at Los Angeles, 1968
University of California at Los Angeles, M.A., 1969

Teaching:
The New School, New York City, present
Art School of the Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, N.Y., present

Collections:
Orffyus Fund, New York City
Hyatt House, Chicago, Illinois

Residence:
New York City

SCULPTURE IN FIBER
Francoise Grossen (left), Ed Rossbach (top right), and Ferne Jacobs (bottom right)
1972 FABRIC VIBRATIONS — focused on tie dye
FABRIC VIBRATIONS

Tie-dye was a technique that became an icon of sixties with tie dyed T-shirts everywhere. This exhibition featured refined and accomplished work by Marian Clayden (left). Garments created by Quinja, and Multifarious Maya (right).
MAKE A BANNER – FLY A BANNER

Turning the museum into a living center became a successful way to engage the public and bring in young people. In 1972 “Make a Banner – Fly a Banner” was held for a couple of weeks. The museum was set up as a workshop for making banners, and at the end of the event Marilyn Wood, the celebration artist created a parade around Rockefeller Center.

Many other public events were presented in Central Park and West 53rd Street was even closed for an artist event in front of the museum.
1973 SEWN STITCHED and STUFFED – featured another fiber focus – 18 artists including work by Paul Harris
SEWN STITCHED and STUFFED
Room environment created by Catherine Jansen
1974 as wearable art was emerging, CLOTHING TO BE SEEN presented unique handmade clothing.
DENIM ART – a result of a competition organized by Levi Strauss was presented in the main floor gallery.
The first quilt show to feature new concepts of quilting was held in 1976.

NEW AMERICAN QUILT featured work by Gwen-Lin Goo illustrated on the cover.
NEW AMERICAN QUILT

Katherine Westfall (left), Anne Raymo (center), and Helen Bitar (right)
1980 FELTING reported on a revival of an almost extinct skill and featured innovative work and a historical and technical section.
FELTING

Joan Livingstone (left) and Dina Barzel (right)
ART TO WEAR 1983 was an update on unique handmade clothing.
Through the United States Information Agency, ART TO WEAR toured Asia where it had a big influence in Korea.
1986 CRAFT TODAY: Poetry of the Physical

It was a major survey show curated on the 30th anniversary of ACM and the inauguration of the new museum space. It included over sixty works in fiber. As a sequel to OBJECTS USA the work in general reflected refinement and clarity of purpose.
CRAFT TODAY: Poetry of the Physical

Wall works included: Anne Wilson (top left), Lia Cook (bottom left), Warren Seelig (center), Adela Akers (top right), and Nance O’Banion (bottom right)
CRAFT TODAY: Poetry of the Physical

Small works: Diane Itter (left) and Mary Bero (right)
CRAFT TODAY: Poetry of the Physical

Quilting: Nancy Whittington (left) and Nancy Crow (right)
CRAFT TODAY: Poetry of the Physical
Vessel forms: John McQueen (left), Dorothy Gill Barnes (middle), and Jane Sauer (right)
CRAFT TODAY: Poetry of the Physical

Art to wear: Tim Harding (left) and Julia Hill (right)
After touring the US, an adapted version CRAFT TODAY: USA went to fifteen cities of Europe. The exhibition was acclaimed by the press and public.
The show had record breaking attendance – 40,000 in Warsaw – 20,000 in Moscow. There was great response to the American work because it was so different from what was going on in Europe.
The Gates (2005) was a large scale site-specific installation in Central Park by Bulgarian artist Christo Javacheff and French artist Jeanne-Claude, known jointly as Christo and Jeanne-Claude. The vast audience it attracted and the massive press it generated around the world honored the significance of fiber art. Jeanne-Claude in an interview said “It has no message, it has no purpose, it is just ART.”
A vast change has taken place during the 20th century. From a focus on traditional work to the break from tradition in the 1950s, today there is outstanding fiber work being created that is receiving both national and international recognition.

Fiber art receives considerable visibility in exhibitions throughout the country, at museums, galleries, and high end art fairs and events.