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 Craftsman’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 online.


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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, leading textile designer, shown here at her loom, in her San Francisco studio, trying out by hand a new pattern for Goodall Fabrics to translate on power looms. Pattern, texture and, above all, color can best be tested on hand-loom before the mill takes over. At many other mills, also, new fabrics are designed on hand-loom.

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.
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.
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 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.
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.
In the 40’s 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 40’s 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 a chair. 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.