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Professionalism

by Stanley Bulbach, Ph.D.

MOST fiberists I know would love the opportunity to sell their work for good prices. Unfortunately, they rarely seem to find much opportunity for that.

Why is that? It should not be an unreasonable goal considering fiber's historic position in the market place of art and luxury goods. After all, last year in Chelsea, New York's high-end art district, one of the major galleries was selling contemporary tapestries for about \$1200 a square foot and higher. These tapestries were not even unique art pieces since they were woven in multiples. In fact, this pricing was commanded even though the weavers were completely anonymous, and the artists designing them were relatively unknown.

Most fiberists I know would love the opportunity to have their work examined and included by art writers and curators documenting the contemporary fiber field. Unfortunately, fiberists can't seem to find much opportunity for that.

And why is that? This should not be an impossible dream considering the large number of museums and organizations funded nowadays with generous public and private support to study, record, and present fiber work. Fiber is arguably the largest segment of the craft arts. So why isn't fiber recorded and exhibited as much as ceramics, glass, jewelry, etc? It can't be an issue of relatively poor popularity. What exactly are curators using to determine what merits their museum's research? When the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York mounted its exhibition of Renaissance Tapestries, that exhibition drew twice as many visitors as the museum's most optimistic projections (*New York Times*, 5/31/02).

So if tapestry is selling well in the art world's key marketplaces, and if tapestry is exhibiting with

surprising success in some of the art world's key art museums, why then are fiberists continuously confronting major economic and academic impediments?

Unfortunately, over the past half decade we have created a field where fiberists have not been encouraged to explore questions like this openly. In fact, our field usually prohibits dialogue raising questions like this. Now that half a century of the contemporary fiber movement has transpired, it is a good time to examine all this more closely.

A Field Where Important Questions Have Not Been Encouraged

Our field has arguably the largest press in the contemporary craft arts. Our field has the largest number of advocacy organizations. Our field has the largest number of conventions and conferences. But go through our periodical indexes and conference programs of the past half century: you will find almost nothing on the difficulties confronting our field and possible ways to overcome them. Why is that? Proposals have been presented for articles and addresses on these issues. But for half a century, they've been pushed to the side.

Instead of transparency and sunlight regarding our field's difficulties, what we find almost exclusively focuses on "how-to-do", history, and biographies. We can certainly be very proud that in the aftermath of global industrialization our arts community has preserved fiber traditions and skills from oblivion. But we can take very little pride indeed in the almost complete silence about the serious problems that deem our field's work to be relatively insignificant.

These issues are extremely important. Most fiberists I know have complained about them informally for their entire lives. It's simply that the contemporary fiber field has been structured not to encourage open, ongoing, thoughtful, constructive discussion about issues crucially important to our field's future.

Waning Vitality

Our field's declining economic vitality in recent years has terminated or shrunk many of our publications. Many of our college courses and degree programs have been disappearing. Many schools have been putting their fiber equipment and supplies out on the curb. The fiber field is

increasingly unable to support suppliers vital to our work. Our fiber organizations are surviving poorly on the donations from fiberists who themselves are less and less able to support organizations sufficiently.

The past thirty years have experienced the greatest boom economies in human history. Vast luxury markets expanded along with breathtaking concentrations of wealth. Other fields have designed and nurtured vibrant gourmet markets. Fashion and art have never been as profitable as in recent decades. But the fiber field has not encouraged an exploration of this. Instead articles on these subjects have been turned down by editors on the grounds that they are not “enjoyable.” They shape the fiber field as an enjoyable stress reducing hobby for retired people with ample pensions. Many internet fiber forums will unsubscribe any contributors venturing beyond “how-to-do” and “what’s on the loom” discussions, deeming discussion of important issues as “skunks ruining our picnic.”

This has all left most of us unaware of how drastically our field has been shrinking during the very best of economic times ever. For example, in 2009 after the current economic storm descended upon us, I asked the Handweavers Guild of America (HGA) what kind of presentations it would consider at Convergence 2010 to explore our field’s economic and financial challenges. As a former HGA Board member I believed this was a crucial question. Unfortunately, the HGA Board did not agree. The membership of the Handweavers Guild of America is now only 60% of what it was 22 years ago.

In “Where Were the Young Folks?” (*Fiberarts Magazine*, Nov. 2002, pp. 6-7) publisher Rob Pulleyn characterized that summer’s HGA Conference as “a conference of old people”. He warned that our field was becoming less attractive and less viable for the younger generation. Indeed, by 2009, the circulation

of *Fiberarts Magazine* itself was only 70% of what it was when he wrote that seven years earlier.

Clearly fewer and fewer people can afford to spend much of their time and resources in our field. What is particularly tragic about this is that the fiber field has always been sitting on a goldmine of very important work that is highly desirable in the marketplace – if our field were ever encouraged to explore reasonable market development and education.

Fortunately, as diminished as fiber’s incoming generation has currently become, some of our field’s newcomers are openly raising crucial questions never before encouraged in our field. And these new bursts of sunshine and fresh air are precisely why books like Elissa Auther’s *String Felt Thread* are so extremely important. (ed. See Bulbach’s review of *String, Felt, Thread* on page 12 of this issue.)

The responses to the questionnaire circulated by the ATA last year indicate that the membership reflects a very wide spectrum of interests in tapestry. Clearly, many ATA members have vital interests in the issues related to the professional aspects of our field. In response, the theme for the Fall edition of ATA’s Tapestry Topics will be for articles and comments on professional topics. As coordinator for this theme, I encourage all interested ATA members — hobbyists, amateurs, students, professionals, tapestry lovers — to participate. Please send a couple of brief paragraphs sketching out your proposal to me at letters at bulbach.com or Julie Barnes at ATA_Julie at msn.com.

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