

High Art? Low Art? Or Just a Hobby?

Stanley Bulbach

This important topic has been raised by Doris Florig, who has worked in ATA over the years to encourage tapestry weavers and the ATA to examine our field of art's uniquely poor economic and professional opportunity and their impact upon our field's future.

Originally "Fine Art" was an attempt to differentiate visual art created by artists focusing solely on aesthetics, unencumbered by practicalities. The alternative category was "Applied Art," the category for art which required co-workers who were thought to dilute the original individual artist's seemingly pure inspiration and to contaminate the aesthetics with pesky technical specifications.

Over time, Fine Art has encompassed additional art forms such as sculpture, architecture, installations, etc., blurring the original distinctions. These new additions obviously do require technical requirements and/or collaboration.

In broad strokes, fiberists in the second half of the 20th Century strove in vain to find a position within this shell game of arbitrary fuzzy classifications. The result is that fiber art is usually categorized in the less significant Applied Arts category. Worse, fiber is judged and treated as even less significant than its sibling craft media arts—for example, ceramics, glass, or jewelry. Thus, our field is treated not even as second class, but as third class art.

After decades of theoretical jejune debates about art vs. craft, the craft arts have fallen upon dire times, losing museums, publications, organizations, etc. This has impacted our fiber field gravely. Friends of Fiberart has folded up. The Handweavers Guild of America has lost 2/3 of its membership size over the past generation.

Fiberarts Magazine was terminated due to "lack of support." The full list is even longer and more alarming.

The original definition of *fine art* differentiated *high art*, requiring refined tastes, from *low art*, the popular art of the unschooled masses. Yet, modern fine arts include, for example, multi-million dollar embalmed sharks, the Brooklyn Museum of Art's "Sensation Exhibition" that pitched vomit bags to museum visitors, and more recently, the exhibiting of bananas taped to walls with duct tape.

I have frequently written that our field seems to have boxed itself into an "Ugly Duckling" syndrome. We keep on seeking validation by gatekeepers who claim they execute expert professional research on tapestry, but rarely do so. We continue to find our field dismissed as an annoying stepchild that deserves to be traditionally under-recorded. But we are not ducklings. Like Hans Christian Andersen's tale, we are signets, and the work featured by ATA over the decades illustrates that impressively.

Seriously, what other field of professional research exists where the expert researchers demonstrate so little interest in examining germane materials brought to their attention? Where is an ATA vetted list of experts who agree to examine materials knowledgeably for ATA members? ATA efforts in 2012 to prepare such a list for the Textile Society of America could not verify such research existing in the U.S.

Nowadays, art museum curators commonly refuse to review any unsolicited materials. In contrast museums now work freely with commercial galleries and patrons, rarely disclosing those potential commercial conflicts

of interest adequately in the final published research. Is that why there's so little visibility and awareness about how financial conflicts of interest distort recent art research? Is the reason why fiber organizations now pay curators to "jury" our work because curators won't otherwise examine our field as part of their purported regular research practice? Is that why there is so very little discussion in ATA about what accurate professional research practice requires?

Many of us think that something here is extremely wrong. Outside the art world, accurate professional research requires transparency and accountability. That is why so many recommendations have been presented to ATA over the years urging these required elements.

Many ATA members state that fiber's poor status is caused solely by the notorious gender prejudice in today's financially soaring art world. But last year ATA-Talk would only refer to impermissible gender prejudice as the "elephant in the room" in a brief discussion thread. Has ATA ever had a probing discussion exploring what part of our plight is gender prejudice and what part is financial/economic prejudice? What if our field suffers from more than one kind of prejudice, amplifying the damaging effects?

ATA depends almost exclusively upon generous volunteerism and member donations. ATA has been impressively successful in providing inspiration, enjoyment, technical education, sharing opportunities, networking, and social benefits. But ATA is quite candid about its policies that brand us almost exclusively as hobbyists, in contrast to having any vital interests at all in professional issues such as loss of school programs, valued suppliers, etc.

ATA policy has even ruled against ATA interacting with the interior design, architecture, and luxury goods industries on the grounds that those are

beneath high art. However, ATA simultaneously brands us as lowly hobbyists. Does the rest of the world value hobbyism as high art or fine art?

Last year ATA took a mini survey asking if membership was either professional or hobbyist. In contrast U.S. Internal Revenue law acknowledges a middle category for hobbyists who sell what they create. The last detailed ATA member survey reported that a stunning majority of the membership (72%) wanted opportunities to sell their art work!

There seems to be nothing available to explain why ATA policy is so opposed to exploring effective economic and professional opportunity for our field. So again, who or what is holding back our field? It's clearly more than one issue.

There are some interesting current developments in New York. One involves the classical music world which had almost exclusively featured work by white European males, because traditional music research found only white European males ever composed or conducted classical music.

But following very vocal advocacy last year, the embarrassed New York classical music world suddenly discovered lots of wonderful classical music by female and minority composers, conductors, vocalists, and instrumentalists. This development shows that it is important to speak out constructively with the clout of a group to advocate improved research—it affects the programming in publicly-funded concert halls and art museums.

Similarly, the Galerie St. Etienne in New York has been publishing a series of riveting critiques on defective art research practice. The venerable gallery even held a public presentation on how inaccurate art research is abetting counterfeiting, giving rise to lawsuits for damages asserting fraudulent expert research. In the courts, judges

are increasingly asking who is doing required “due diligence” in the art world.

In the field of art research few admit to knowing that such a requirement even exists! But in 2017 this fatal research flaw was outed by the Fuller Craft Museum’s tapestry and turned wood exhibition, which described its focus as “populations that have been traditionally under represented.” This was a stunning admission, that these fields have not received the recognition that is due.

Isn’t it illegal, or at the least, unethical, for institutions receiving public funding, like art museums, to under represent populations just because that damaging practice has been “traditional?” Whenever any fiberist raises these concerns, that tapestry or fiber arts are under-represented within the world of art criticism, the concerns are met with silence. The very essence of academic research is openness and the ability to challenge how research is executed.

Auspiciously, an important opportunity is now available to the ATA movement. As professional art research is increasingly acknowledged to include major inaccuracies, the College Art Association (CAA) is finally inaugurating a Committee on Research and Scholarship. Here is an opportunity for contemporary tapestry art to be part of the discussion, about how it is researched and categorized in higher education in the U.S.

As elsewhere the major challenge here is that if only a few voices speak forth, they will likely be quietly escorted to CAA’s back alley door. What is clearly required is for ATA to seize this opportunity as a strong organizational voice advocating on behalf of contemporary tapestry in this CAA effort.

Over the past decade several formal ATA projects have been convened to develop formal recommendations to the Board. Most of the official recommendations have been declined

without clarification or membership discussion. One rejected recommendation was for ATA to exchange affiliated memberships with professional organizations like the College Art Association, the Alliance of American Museums, etc., to expand ATA’s ability to participate in securing transparency and accountability in the art research practiced upon our field.

Also, for ATA’s Five Year Plan, the Board tasked Think Tanks with presenting formal recommendations for the Board’s planning. One such recommendation presented to the Board was for an ATA Committee on Advocacy. Many other special interest organizations have advantageously encouraged advocacy, for example, nurses, doctors, teachers, architects, and professors. But the formal recommendation for an ATA Committee on Advocacy was rejected without comment.

The College Art Association asserts that it strongly supports advocacy. Its new Committee on Research and Scholarship is a golden opportunity for concerned ATA members to engage in something less elusive than parsing the ever-mutating category of Fine Art or tiptoeing around elephants in the room and other damaging prejudices.

Over the millennia fiber art throughout the world has undergone many changes. What has always remained the same is that it is a universal technology, art form, and commodity constantly renewing itself for all humanity, not just some parts of it. Today the field is presented as almost exclusively for women. But in almost all of its photos, the field is even more limited, not only by race and geography, but also by age and likely also by economics. Is exclusivity in so many ways the wisest way to achieve our field’s stated goals?

About 7% of ATA’s membership is in their 40s or younger. Most younger folk are wrestling with historic tuition debt, decreased employment

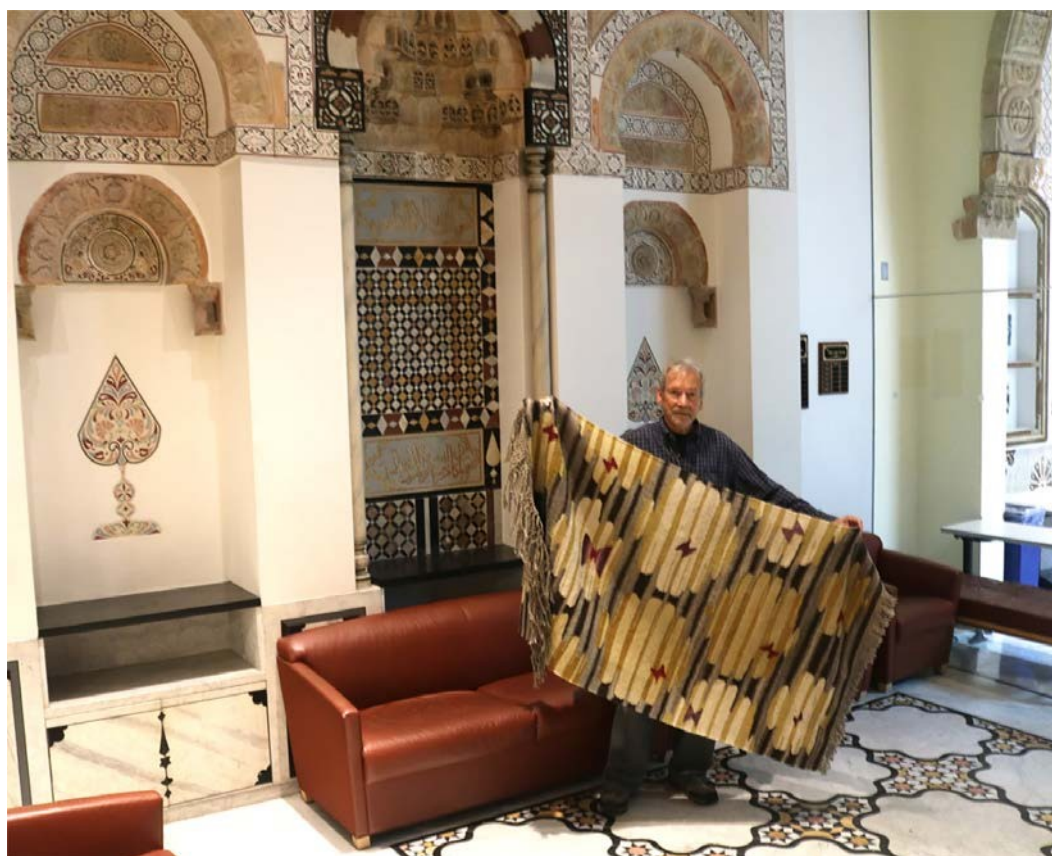
opportunity, a medical insurance crisis for young single parents, and more. Do we really believe we can successfully attract the needed younger generations for our field when cultivating it as only a hobby?

Why shouldn't our field have the professional and economic opportunity enjoyed by the rest of the art world, to support its future? These are not encouraging actuarial developments for ATA which is so undercapitalized that it asks for donations multiple times each year.

ATA now has the opportunity to work with professional organizations like the CAA to improve the accuracy of the research that records our

field's existence and achievements. Currently our challenge is not debating into what pigeonhole we should all be categorized. Today our challenge is that the professional research record brands us as almost non-existent in any category.

We do not have to be dependent upon unproductive categorization. And we do not have to be entirely charity dependent for our future. With accurate professional research that begins to acknowledge our existence, contemporary tapestry weavers would be able to gain important support for improved market and professional opportunity in the interior design, architecture, and luxury goods industries.



Stanley Bulbach, "Interwoven Over Millennia: East, West, Ancient and New" at the Richard Ettinghausen Library of the Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies at New York University, 2019, photo: Dan Franklin Smith.