

Letter to the Editor re:

“The Museum’s New Clothes”

[*Textile Forum* Editor: At the time at writing the above contribution,* we at *Textile Forum* were not aware of the fact that the Museum of Art and Design’s change of name and planned change of location caused a strong reaction both in the New York papers and among artists. Here is a taste of it, written specially for *Textile Forum* by a colleague whose website is worth a visit: www.bulbach.com.]

As an American fiber artist who has been writing about our somewhat secretive field for decades, I read your September 2003 editorial with concern. It addressed the transformation of the American Craft Museum into the Museum of Arts & Design and tied the change closely to American political and economic attitudes.

I am a resident of downtown Manhattan and a local community leader in my neighborhood. Like *Textile Forum*, I remain horrified and confused, not only by the three attacks upon us in the past decade, but also by Washington’s unilateral response. I agree with *Textile Forum*’s concerns about economic policies that raise profit far above all other values. And I too am alarmed at the lack of understanding between Eastern and Western cultures, particularly since my fiber art is strongly influenced by my doctorate from New York University in Near Eastern Studies.

However, I am concerned that the editorial links these issues together in a way that confuses its main point — the crisis in art museum research on our field. Indeed heated issues such as the war and economy

demonstrate what can go terribly wrong when the public is confused misinformed and misled. And the fiber art community seems to be quite confused, misinformed, and misled about the changes at the American Craft Museum.

For several years now, there have been serious questions raised in the U.S. about the research done by art museums. In 2000, the American Association of Museums issued “New Ethical Guidelines” calling for increased transparency and accountability in how museums select art. Books have also been published detailing these problems. Although the fiber art community in the U.S. discourages open discussion of this crisis, here lies the roots of the unfortunate changes at the American Craft Museum that rightly alarm *Textile Forum*. It is encouraging to find *Textile Forum* discussing these issues openly.

Fiber art is arguably the largest constituent of the field of American craft art. And yet it is wrongly treated as a minor constituent. The official research record on fiberart is woefully deficient and inaccurate, and that has been disenfranchising fiber artists and

*The Museum’s New Clothes” is an editorial published by *Textile Forum* published in Hamburg, Germany (2003, issue #3, p. 1). The letter in response was published in 2003 (issue #4, p. 2).

excluding them from the benefits of credible art research.

Originally, the American Craft Museum had voiced the strongest commitment in the U.S. to that research. Then recently a survey by the museum determined that the public disliked craft art. The survey response was a clear, unambiguous indictment that the museum had failed to do proper curatorial research and public education. But the museum ignored that indictment, and merely changed its focus and its building.

The irresponsible transformation of this museum could not succeed unless the U.S. art community were being distracted, misled and misinformed about it. And that is the major challenge confronting us.

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October 29, 2003
New York City

The U.S. fiber art community and its media do not encourage open discussion about these types of issues. The field has deeply ingrained censorship, self-censorship, and “stonewalling” where officials refuse to answer questions. There are also reports of undisclosed “blacklisting” that imposes an official silence upon fiber artists who alarm the establishment. At least *Textile Forum* publicly disclosed that it did not wish to report on art related to 9/11 and violence.

The analogy implied by *Textile Forum* — The Emperor’s New Clothes — is appropriate. Although many American fiber artists see much that is shockingly wrong with research on our field of art, we are rarely permitted to discuss it openly and constructively. Thank you *Textile Forum*.