

# A Long-Delayed Professional Conversation

By Stanley Bulbach, PhD

I rejoined the Textile Society of America for several reasons: 1) TSA's enthusiastic invitations; 2) the pride TSA voiced for exploring professional issues; and 3) my personal celebration of working in the fiber field for four decades.

I have served in the following roles: Board Member of the Handweavers Guild of America (HGA); an American Tapestry Alliance digital bulletin board co-founder and co-monitor; and a frequently published writer, teacher, and lecturer. Also, I am an artist working with premium wool growers, creating my own yarns and my own traditional dyes. I create flat-woven carpets from timeless Near Eastern traditions as contemporary art to be displayed on the wall.



*Image Caption: Stanley Bulbach with black Lincoln fleece*

*Photo credit: Dan Franklin Smith, 2016*

The contemporary fiber field is arguably the largest in the craft media arts, while being grossly under-recorded in art research and treated officially as less significant than ceramics, glass, jewelry, etc. Other craft media arts usually enjoy being researched by people with expertise in those fields. The record on contemporary fiber, however, is primarily documented by people who are neither in our field nor include required safeguards like exercising due diligence. For decades

fiber organizations have asked why it is almost impossible to accurately identify who is examining our field. Fiber organizations ask what commercial galleries examine fiber art, what publications agree to cover it, what art writers agree to record it, who its collectors are, etc.

For accuracy and reliability, all quality academic research in the liberal arts and sciences requires: 1) transparency and accountability of research design; 2) disclosures of conflicts of interest; 3) disclosures of limitations such as participation fees; 4) due diligence; and 5) discussion opportunities to test the conclusions. Our field seems not to encourage these research requirements and therefore we struggle with the economic and professional consequences.

The poor visibility of contemporary fiber art impacts not only fiber artists. It diminishes professional and economic opportunity throughout the entire fiber field: teaching opportunities, public interest in historic textiles, curatorial opportunities, longevity of publications, vitality of galleries, viability of museums, etc. The more undercapitalized fiber organizations urgently request additional donations, the more they are only competing against each other for the same decreasing capital in our field.

For example, HGA membership has plummeted catastrophically from above 10,000 in 1990 to 3,651 in 2016. That includes a major loss of dues. In August, HGA seemed surprised by a shortfall in scholarship donations and the "greying" of our field. Similarly the American Tapestry Alliance recently indicated that, in 2015, the average ATA member age was approaching 70 with only 2% being under 40.

HGA, ATA, and TSA all have a very serious lack of diversity but offer little more to attract broader membership than an enjoyable, costly, time-consuming hobby, requiring independent economic resources.

In the Spring 2018 TSA Newsletter, I reported how the Fuller Museum of Craft stated its exhibition was about "under-recorded" art. Chronic under-recording can only indicate a defect in professional research practice. Yet the Fuller's crucial call for a conversation about that was met with almost universal silence.

According to the TSA's Mission Statement, TSA seems to be the best prepared fiber organization to cultivate that conversation about exploring how institutions and individuals are examining contemporary fiber art and how the current deficient research record impairs our field's ability to thrive in the future.

And, where TSA is urgently soliciting donations, improved economic and professional opportunity can only help current members better afford to contribute and new members better afford to join. Thus, as a returning TSA member, I believe it is vitally important to answer the following question: where in the TSA's activities can the constructive conversation encouraged by the Fuller Craft Museum's exhibition be initiated and supported?

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