

ATA STUDY GROUP: The Business of Weaving — Recommendations and Conclusion for the ATA Board

Members who participated in the Business of Weaving Study Group were expecting to review and optimize professional practices to improve the marketing of tapestry art, an unrealized goal in the ATA's Mission Statement. However, we soon concluded this business improvement is impossible due to principal deficiencies that underlie our field's poor achievement in the competitive contemporary art world. Our field is extremely weak in market education and development, in advocacy, and in open, ongoing, challenging discussions required to resolve those acute deficiencies.

Over the past decades, the ATA has excelled in its focus on technical education and recording contemporary tapestry art. However, the study group concludes that these educational opportunities are not addressing how our field can participate successfully in the professional art world, how art is promoted to the public, how the art market really works, etc.

The study group believes it is urgently important to present the formal conclusions of its explorations to the ATA Board and then to the membership itself. We urge the ATA Board to engage these three crucial deficiencies. To initiate that process, we recommend specific affordable actions that are immediately available to the ATA.

Three Recommendations

1) Encourage ongoing, open, problem solving dialogue about our field's unique challenges

The ATA can take great pride in providing its members the opportunity to discuss issues beyond the standard fiberist venue of how-to-do, history, and biographies. The ATA has also made a strong commitment to offering more than maintaining tapestry art as a hobby. Indeed, about 20% of the responses to the ATA Questionnaire two years ago reflected membership interest in "professional" issues.

But while the ATA allows limited discussion on professional issues, it must promote probing, problem-solving dialogue opportunities and skills, if only to sustain its organization on more than a dependency upon contributions and discretionary incomes. Currently, the ATA hosts 16 discussion boards each of which is cordoned off from all the others. These do not fulfil the urgent need for timely membership-wide visibility of information and ideas.

Currently, the only open venue for dialogue among the entire ATA membership is via the membership newsletter. If a comment is published by one member for the rest of the membership to read it in *Tapestry Topics*, responses will not be shared until the next issue appears three months later. That's as fast as 17th Century transatlantic sailing ship mail delivery. Artists in other media benefit from the advantages of faster communications. The field of tapestry art would benefit enormously if ATA had a general discussion board like the Weaving Mailing List at Weaving@quilt.net (<http://lists101.his.com/mailman/listinfo/weaving>).

2) Maximize Public Visibility and Public Education About Our Field

Some of the most ardent questions in our study group were about our field's relative invisibility in museums, commercial galleries, art research and the general media. That lack of visibility does more than impair public awareness of our field. It also creates a misleading impression that our field has actually been carefully examined by art experts but found by them to be rejected as inferior, although careful examination has not been occurring.

Almost every advocacy organization and commercial enterprise has to promote its goals through expensive professional public relations and advertising campaigns. The *New York Times* continuously demonstrates how market success in the contemporary art world depends greatly on professional advertising, public relations, and promotion.

Tapestry Topics, the ATA newsletter, is an impressive display of wonderful artwork and writing by ATA's members. It is precisely the kind of powerful promotional tool that lucrative budgets attempt to buy for public education, market development, promotion, and advertising. Currently, the ATA restricts this powerful promotional tool to members only as a membership benefit, literally "hiding our candle under a bushel", when it should be positioning our work as a beacon for all to see. A far better membership benefit than an eMagazine would be helping members sell at rewarding prices by placing *Tapestry Topics* into the hands of everyone in the art marketplace.

Up until about 2007 there was a sustained period of economic growth and wealth unparalleled in the past five millennia of human history during which the contemporary art market has only soared higher and higher. The ATA Board should consider how counterproductive that insular policy has been during that same economic boom for other organizations using that same outdated paradigm.

During that economic growth (from 1988 to 2010), subscriptions to HGA's *Shuttle Spindle & Dyepot* — the primary membership benefit offered by the Handweavers Guild of America — decreased from 10,469 down to 5,985, a loss of 43%.

From 1996 to present, subscriptions to *American Craft Magazine* — the primary membership benefit offered by the American Craft Council — steadily decreased from 27,006 to 21,607, a loss of 35%.

The ATA newsletter should be freely available in searchable PDF format on the Internet. Issues should be freely mass-emailed by the ATA to museums, writers, publications, galleries, interior designers, interior decorators, architects, schools, universities, etc. all over the world. At the very least, until the ATA can find a new paradigm of membership benefits, the ATA should initiate a compromise, using issues for promotion and public education via the Internet a half a year or more after their initial publication date.

3) Advocate Strongly for Our Field

Our field is seen by the public not as art, but as a hobby, largely because our field is publicly promoted and branded as a hobby.

As Interweave Press emphasized half a decade ago, our field of contemporary fiber has been structured and optimized for retiring members of the Boomer generation with ample discretionary income and free time, seeking stress reducing hobbies and their social benefits. But the younger generations are not

“flush with postwar prosperity” and to not have “time and disposable income on their hands”. The ability of younger generations to come into our field as a hobby is increasingly limited. What have our advocacy organizations stated about this?

The ATA’s official Mission Statement pledges “to encourage use of tapestries by corporate, liturgical and private collectors”. That’s means encouraging marketing. To do that, the ATA has to provide more than a Publicity Committee. The ATA need an audible Advocacy Committee to network with other organizations, institutions and industries to present forums at conferences or on the internet, to explore mutually shared concerns, and to share information that empowers the ATA membership. For example, that network should include:

- American Art Dealers Association;
- American Association of Museums;
- American Craft Council;
- American Institute of Architects;
- American Society of Interior Designers;
- College Art Association;
- SOFA (Sculpture Objects & Functional Art).

An ATA Advocacy Committee could finally provide the membership with up-to-date, and periodically verified lists of:

- Galleries that promote and sell our work;
- Museums and curators that examine and study our work;
- Interior designers, decorators, and architects interested in knowing about our work;
- University programs related to our field;
- Other organizations and businesses related to our field;
- Publications interested in publishing our field’s work; and
- Writers interested in writing about our field’s work.

CONCLUSION

The recommendations of this study group were not formulated and based upon unsupported personal preferences or opinion. The group’s reading list included books written by authorities in the contemporary art world concerned about the discrepancy between the art world’s public image as academically vetted and its actual operations as a secretive, unbridled market place.

- *The \$12 Million Stuffed Shark: The Curious Economics of Contemporary Art*, Don Thompson;
- *Art of the Steal*, Christopher Mason;
- *Culture Incorporated: museums, artists, and corporate sponsorships*, Mark W. Rectanus;
- *String Felt Thread: the Hierarchy of Craft and Art in American Craft*, Elissa Auther; and
- *The Painted Word*, Tom Wolfe.

In addition, the group’s ongoing discussions and evaluations included contemporaneous reports from the *New York Times*, whose art business journalism is focused on the epicenter of the American contemporary art market, New York City.

The study group started out focussing on:

- Improving Your Professional Image
- Working with a Commercial Gallery
- Understanding the Art Market
- Promoting the Art of Tapestry Weaving

As the study group proceeded, it identified many problems and deficiencies regarding our market development and came to conclusions including:

- Our field must address the public's lack of appreciation of our primary medium, wool, and to promote the medium's historical prized qualities.
- Our field must start to compete in the public arena against painting's marketing.
- Our field must begin to engage with its academic faculty.
- Our advocacy organizations have to require something better than the current defective academic research practice on our field.
- Our advocates have to cease featuring us and branding our field publicly as a hobby and have to promote our field also as an art form equal to others in the craft arts and fine arts.
- Our field has to alter its current agenda that treats economic vitality as unimportant and even somewhat dirty, unethical, inappropriate, improper and unnecessary.
- Our field's structure has to cease discouraging spirited, challenging, problem solving dialogue.
- Our field must expose misleading Red Herrings and inaccurate public impressions about our work and cease inadvertently fostering them.
- Our field must begin to direct its formidable organizational resources to explore our economic standing.
- Our field must accurately list up-to-date key resources and professionals enthusiastic about tapestry.

All the conclusions we discussed are, we believe, extremely important to our field's position in the contemporary art market and field. But so much has to be done, and so much has to be solved regarding how to proceed that this study group purposely narrowed its focus onto three initial key recommendations that are clearly commensurate with the ATA Mission Statement, with the abilities of the organization, with the wishes in the ATA Questionnaire of a significant interest of the membership, with ATA's economic needs as a major organization, and with the significant needs of younger generations if we are to pass on our field successfully.

The study group would be delighted to share the details of all of our concerns and conclusions in, preferably, a dialogue open to all ATA members, or in a further report for the Board and the Membership.

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