

“What? Colored Wools! Why?”

by Stanley Bulbach, Ph.D.

Based on his Keynote Address delivered at the World Congress on Coloured Wools in Eugene, Oregon, 1987. The issues raised in this presentation remain as timely today for the field of fiber art and craft as they were back then.

In the ancient Fertile Crescent, rivers in the midst of arid environments created unique conditions that accelerated the human development. Here was the opportunity to control the waters and to exploit them for irrigated agriculture and transport. These opportunities fostered the development of management skills. After the last Ice Age ended about 10,000 B.C.E., it was there along the water's edge that the seeds of most of the first cities and their civilizations began to take root and grow. By about 3,200 B.C.E., these peoples developed writing and history began.

The Mesopotamian cultures, like most of the Near East, used wool for the majority of their textile needs. Health, comfort, protection from the elements, wealth, art, etc., all depended upon wool. As people learned to organize labor to attend the irrigation needs of agriculture, so too they organized labor and materials efficiently to produce more woolen goods than they needed for their basic personal wants. They were able then to produce non-essential luxury goods as well as a surplus to export profitably. The ancient wool industry was the foundation of a rapidly developing trade economy that profited these early cities greatly while also providing one of life's essential needs, well functioning clothing.

The preeminence of the wool economy in the Near East and the Mediterranean continued with the early Greek shipping

expansion through the Roman and Hellenistic Period for similar reasons. Much later the wool industries were among the economic pillars of the Renaissance. After that, wool's primacy in Britain led the Industrial Revolution which transformed Europe and North America, and then the rest of the world.

The spin-offs from the wool industries are many, including the dye industries which then developed into the modern photo-chemical industries. The evermore intricate looms brought us to complex mechanics, to Jacquard looms automated by hole punch cards, and to modern business machines with similar cards, which were the prototypes of today's computers.

And most important for us today is that the public has lost most of its knowledge and understanding of wool.

However, in recent years, the public has forgotten the role played in history by the woolen textile industries. And most important for us today is that the public has lost most of its knowledge and understanding of wool. Today, there is almost no public awareness of variations in characteristics and qualities that differentiate wools. The public today is provided little idea what to look for and what to guard against in judging wools, especially in the U.S.

In the mid 70's when I began to focus seriously on weaving, my first carpets disappointed me. They seemed to lack a physical vitality. Although I had done a considerable amount of research before I had begun, none of the basic publications ever informed me about the complex nature of wools. As I had no idea that wools varied as significantly as woods, I did not suspect that the factor made yarns I bought might be inappropriate for my work's needs.

At that time I was working on my doctorate in Near Eastern Studies. In examining ethnic carpets from that region, I saw unfamiliar wools with a large fiber diameter and very bright luster. This led me to visit growers of premium wools for handspinners, where I was introduced to Lincoln and Romney wools. While I was distressed to add the work of selecting and spinning my own yarns to the daunting tasks of natural dyeing and handweaving, the processes of hand-spinning did provide me the special wool yarns that reproduced the qualities of the ethnic treasures that are so admirable.

The almost total lack of market education for this potential market is the major challenge confronting us all today.

As to the rich silver, black, and brown yarns and the muted dyed shades in the ethnic weavings, these of course were the wools from the colored sheep. In the mid-70's, their availability in the U.S. was greatly limited, and despite crop and market growth, they are still relatively rare. It has been most difficult to find information on these, for these colored wools are virtually unknown to most people. These colored wools have become integral to my art work, and I find that the public is very strongly attracted to them. And yet, when I talk with the public

about these wools, their response is inevitably, "Colored wools! What?"

We all should note that the public is attracted to these wonderful colored wools. Now we must begin to tell them why they should purchase these wools. The almost total lack of market education for this potential market is the major challenge confronting us all today. Growing colored sheep has changed over the past decade or so. It was originally a very modest undertaking, often a hobby with pets, supported largely by personal dedication. But after considerable development, the point has now been reached where basic business rules must be applied. Now as growers attempt to increase flock sizes and to revive breeds that have been almost completely lost, these projects will need the support of major economic forces.

The ancient Greek origin of the word "economy" is revealing. The first part is from "oikos," the word for "home." The second part is from "nomos," from the word for "law." "Economy" is literally, "the law of the home," or as they say in gambling establishments, "the house rules." Depending upon how growers of premium wools position themselves, economic forces will either propel them or impede them. The future growth of the colored sheep industry needs an economic base to support it. What is that economic base? How is it being developed?

Craftspeople and artists are the prime market for the wools of colored sheep. And we seem to be reaching a point where today's spinners, knitters, and weavers are not buying up enough of these wools at a high enough price to support this small industry. Why? Because handspun premium wools remain a secret and no supportive market is

being developed for this commodity's products.

Growers of premium wools and craftspeople who work with their wools are all part of the same production pipeline. Thus growers have a vital economic interest in not one but two markets. First, the craftspeople and fiber artists who buy their fleece; and second, the public, which is the market buying what craftspeople and fiber artists create. It is this craft and art buying public which is the ultimate factor now determining what volume of premium fleece craftspeople can purchase from growers. Currently the market for items made of premium wools is almost totally ignored. But if it were developed, the buying public would demand many more products of premium wools. This market development, however, requires that growers, craftspeople and artists will have to focus cooperatively upon market education to cultivate this market's growth.

All other industries acknowledge the crucial value of market education and development. Why don't we?

What does the buying public know about these special wools? Very little. Today the public has almost no positive information on wool, and retains strong prejudices against it. Some of the bad image of this commodity comes from the past promotion campaigns by the synthetic fiber industry. Some of it comes from the predominance of cheap, poor quality woolens that flood the market place, and the relative invisibility of premium quality woolens. If you query the public about wools, you usually hear the same misinformed response that all wools are the same: itchy, moth prone, unwashable, changeable in size, etc.

Here is the paramount task confronting growers and craftspeople who want to develop their market: The absence of adequate market education on wools. Growers! Why are your colored wools so special? And craftspeople and fiber artists! Why are your products and art made of these wools so desirable? The public must be informed. Why not tell your market? All other industries acknowledge the crucial value of market education and development. Why don't we?

Today, there are strong markets in most consumer fields for "gourmet" products. Consumers know that most products have common grades and better grades which are more expensive and luxurious. The public is also more curious than ever before, and will stop and listen to such market information. And the public is more willing nowadays to pay for those better quality commodities

Growers and craftspeople can easily begin to develop a much larger market for their products with very little additional effort and investment. Since craft and market development are both educational fields, special market development supports are available in the vibrant educational network of fiber guilds, conferences, publications, etc.

A heightened editorial focus on the integration of fiber used with the finished piece would benefit everyone in our field.

Growers should participate in this network with a far more critical eye to educational information. Growers who are advertisers should work more closely with the publications and their editors to enhance wool information in them. A heightened editorial focus on the integration of fiber

used with the finished piece would benefit everyone in our field.

In addition, premium wool growers' organizations should interact with the fiber crafts' many publications, guilds, and conferences, as an ongoing comprehensive program.

Growers' organizations should also think about collaborating with craftspeople to develop products which will not only begin to educate the public, but will also be profitably marketable. With an eye especially to the popularity of knitted goods, if the public knew about the superior qualities of handspun premium wools, they would clamor to buy such products. Growers should be working closely with guilds to support projects producing marketable products of premium handspun wools knitted on knitting machines.

Currently the craft media focus on art clothing and special fashion, which are unique, costly products for which there is relatively little market. But the market today is strongest for professionals and business people who need formal clothing for work that is elegant, serviceable, comfortable, sturdy, and affordable. The craft media focus primarily on female fashion, but the actual market is at least half male. The craft media focus primarily on white and dyed yarns, while the urban market is strongly predisposed toward browns, blacks, and greys; that is, toward the very spectrum of colored wools. The collaboration between premium colored wool growing, handspinning, and machine knitting would find a very

strong public market today, and yet this entire area of cooperative activity has thus far remained overlooked.

Market development and public consumer education are essential priorities.

It is high time for a major museum exhibition of handspun wool projects based on the mastery of traditional techniques. Again, growers organizations could ally themselves with a major craft organization, publisher, or educational institution to put together such a project that could travel widely to fascinate and educate the public.

Market development and public consumer education are essential priorities. Today growers and craftspeople have it within their grasp to open up a vibrant market. Today, the supports in our fields and the potential public interest are there just waiting to be utilized.

The general public is our most important market, but the public simply does not have enough product information on why they should seek out and invest in products made of premium colored wools.

“What! Colored wools! Why?” The public always asks this. We must answer them with specific information as to why they should invest in one of history's most important and treasurable aesthetic luxuries. “For the finest quality premium wools of beautiful, rich, natural colors, for making the finest quality fashion and art.”