



AMERICAN TAPESTRY ALLIANCE

TAPESTRYTOPICS

A QUARTERLY REVIEW OF TAPESTRY ART TODAY

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Reprinted from Tapestry Topics, Autumn 2011, Vol 37, No. 3

... to establish a professional networking system

by Stanley Bulbach, Ph.D.

An organization's Mission Statement is its guiding North Star. Its Mission Statement is also its binding commitment to its membership, to its field, to its community, to the public, and to the future. The Mission Statement of the American Tapestry Alliance is proudly posted on its publicly accessible website. It focuses on ATA's goals as a non-profit educational organization. These goals are extremely important for tapestry today:

- to promote an awareness of and appreciation for woven tapestries designed and woven by individual artists;
- to establish, perpetuate and recognize superior quality tapestries by artists world-wide;
- to coordinate exhibitions of tapestries to establish a professional networking system for tapestry designers and weavers throughout the world;
- to encourage use of tapestries by corporate, liturgical and private collectors and
- to educate the public about the history and techniques involved in tapestry making.

These are bold ambitions for our reserved community of tapestry makers. They call for our field's interaction with the larger world beyond the comfort zone of our traditionally smaller informal circles. They require our field to rethink its traditional paradigm that never encourages business, self-promotion, or challenging discourse.

That larger outside world is increasingly formidable. Most of us remember earlier times and the popular saying, "Build a better mouse-trap and the world will beat a path to your door." Well, our field builds better mousetraps. We have been aspiring to have the art world see our work, judge it appropriately, and include it. But since the early 1980s, the dominant market and cultural forces have been those of the new "Market Based Economy."

This modern marketplace of goods and ideas is based upon mass marketing, intense competition, branding, and the paramount priority of profitability over quality, design and functionality. But our field does not teach or encourage speaking out. In the ATA we even have to listen to yelling about calling



Stanley Bulbach with "Times Square," a flying carpet

members artists. Clearly our field is greatly disadvantaged in this new, more competitive world

In today's marketplace of goods and ideas, whatever is not profitable is deemed not significant; and vice versa. Since fiber art and its community does not participate in the current marketplace in any way as dynamically as the communities working in ceramics, glass, metal, etc., fiber is the economic welfare case of the contemporary craft art field. The entire operational emphasis is dependent upon donations, contributions, and volunteerism. Thus fiber work is deemed by experts and validators to be less significant than other fields in the craft arts. And that becomes part of a vicious cycle: lack of market value, hence lack of significance, hence lack of market value, *ad infinitum*.

For example, the center of the U.S. art world is New York City and artists strive for coverage in its "newspaper of record," the *New York Times*. Except for rare exceptions, the *Times* only covers art sold in commercial art galleries or art being featured in museums charging admissions and buying advertising. What's recorded in the *New York Times* primarily reflects commercially promoted sales inventory and work selected by museums as most attractive for paying tourists. Hence another vicious cycle where lack of purported validation and lack of commercial interest are tightly linked.

Although a number of scholarly books have been published about the morphing of the museum world from education into the tourism, entertainment, and social network industries, this remains somewhat unknown to most fiberists. Also few know that the art market here in New York City is one of our largest financial markets, even though it is totally unregulated, unaccountable, and extremely secretive. In the past year alone, two *Times* writers were so concerned about all this as to write in the *Times* itself that the newspaper's art coverage should be shifted from the Arts Section to the Business Section.

In the ATA Mission Statement, one goal has stood out as key to the achievement of all the others: "to

coordinate exhibitions of tapestries to establish a professional networking system for tapestry designers and weavers throughout the world."

ATA works hard to produce exhibitions. But these exhibitions are not merely the social gatherings of hobbyists that most guild type exhibitions are. The Mission Statement has clearly described the ATA exhibitions as intended "to establish a professional networking system". It is extremely important to appreciate this qualification, because, among other things, if ATA members make appropriate use of it, this unique network can help resolve many of the problems and pitfalls that traditionally dog the field of contemporary tapestry.

Networks are of little help unless effective information is being communicated across them. So when "a professional networking system" is established by the ATA for its membership, what professional information is the membership communicating across it? What is the ATA leadership encouraging to be communicated? By definition this must include a dialogue regarding professional issues crucial to our field.

For example, let's start with the spectacular tapestry work that ATA members share on the ATA website, in the ATA Newsletter, and in ATA exhibitions.

Obviously, I am not alone in feeling that this body of tapestry work is awesome and constitutes a significant art movement in our own time.

But does anyone one outside the ATA feel that same way? Do professionals outside the ATA agree with us? Every tapestry maker I know claims to be interested in having an opportunity to sell their work if the price is right. So where do we talk about those issues among ourselves, with our audiences, and to our markets?

The ATA website is large and complex. But if members locate the Links page and then scroll way down, they will discover the short list of galleries that the ATA deems interested in tapestry work. That is a list of five galleries.

But there are dozens of art galleries and art experts in North America claiming to follow contemporary craft art including fiber. So what is the reason for the lack of art gallery interest listed on the ATA website? Is this due to ATA not looking? Or is this due to art galleries and experts creating a misleading public impression that they are interested in all areas of the craft arts, when in truth they don't want to get near fiber? Where do we discuss this glaring discrepancy in the broad light of day?

Consider SOFA, the commercial Sculpture Objects & Functional Art fair that has annual events all around the country. SOFA publicly claims that its vendors present the best available contemporary craft artwork to SOFA's public and market.

This past year at SOFA in New York City, of the approximately 50 vendors claiming to represent the best in contemporary craft art, only about seven of them acknowledge on their websites having anything to do with any kind of fiber work at all. A number of that minority have even documented elsewhere that they no longer look at fiber despite what they post on their websites. So where in ATA's professional network are members discussing the misleading image SOFA NYC shares with the public about our field?

Branding is one of the most powerful forces in promoting ideas and selling goods, something the ATA recognizes in its Annual Report 2009-2010: "Re-branding ATA. Re-branding involves examining the way we communicate our mission and goals."

Unfortunately, our field has been very broadly and strongly branded as merely a hobby. This branding as a hobby is not only imposed from without, but also from major forces within the fiber field itself.

Over the past third of a century our field of work has been shown and promoted to the public as significant and serious by *Fiberarts Magazine*. Then in 2004 *Fiberarts Magazine* was bought by Interweave Press. Decades ago Interweave Press had been one of the most important and supportive publishing houses in the contemporary fiber

renaissance. But by 2004 Interweave Press had rebranded itself. It was no longer covering a wide spectrum of the fiber field's makers. Instead it focused on the value and profitability of its advertising to:

"Women of the Boomer Generation — a vast group are moving into the years of self-fulfillment with more disposable income than ever. These women are also part of the great craft revival of the 1960s and 1970s and are eager to reconnect to the craft." (Marilyn Murphy, president of Interweave Press, from the 2004 website of the "Spinning and Weaving Association", a marketing group of Interweave Press).

If the ATA can only identify and list five art galleries in the entirety of North America interested in tapestry, and if only 14% of SOFA New York vendors can find fiber art to feature and sell, then just how profitable a cash cow could fiber as a hobby be?

The answer is, profitable enough for Interweave Press to be bought for approximately \$10 Million (according to *Folio*, June 6, 2005) by Aspire Media, a company formed to collect and invest in hobbyists publications. Aspire's board included investors from the Mequoda Group, LLC, Bristol, RI, Frontenac Company, Chicago, IL and Catalyst Investors, NY, NY.

So our fiber media has had considerable outside encouragement to promote us publicly as primarily a hobby for retired Boomers with comfortable disposable incomes.

But by targeting the hobbyist market, Interweave discovered that "[H]owever, the support for *Fiberarts* has not been strong enough over the past several years to keep it in circulation." And this past June Interweave terminated *Fiberarts Magazine*, our principal print advocate in the public arena. Keep in mind that over this same general time period, the Renaissance Tapestry Exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City attracted twice as many visitors as their most optimistic projections, and the museum's

retrospective of Alexander McQueen's fashion this year was extended twice and expected to become one of the museum's 10 most popular exhibitions.

When our field is publicly branded in a way that devalues our work and even cuts off coverage of it altogether, where are we encouraged to discuss this effectively in the ATA's professional networking system?

Our field is losing fiber publications, educational programs, prized suppliers and equipment makers, teaching and writing opportunities, students, marketing opportunities, etc. Most ATA members I know are keenly concerned about how they are viewed by the public and their potential market. ATA members are particularly concerned about scholarly and professional "validation". But our field does not even enjoy the benefits of proper scholarly research or professional courtesy.

In the process of coordinating this theme, I reached out to colleagues teaching in college art departments for statements. Unfortunately only Prof. Elissa Auther and Dr. Glenn Adamson contributed to this project. Our college art departments don't have much boilerplate text available addressing students' needs to participate in dialogue on professional issues affecting what they will be striving to do after graduation. One of the very important questions raised by Prof. Auther's book *String Felt Thread* (reviewed in *Tapestry Topics*, Spring, 2011), is how the work of individual fiberists can ever be validated, if our field itself is not considered valid by art authorities including those in academia.

Can it be that the public image presented by Interweave Press is indeed correct, that we are primarily a field only for retired Boomer hobbyists with comfortable disposable incomes?

Two years ago, the ATA circulated a questionnaire among its membership. 25% of the membership responded! Statistically that is an unusually large response. So ATA members are unusually interested, active and concerned.

We learn that fewer than 7% of the respondents claimed to be hobbyists. Then how did ATA members identify themselves? Well, 11% of the respondents identified themselves as Professional Tapestry Artists.

Other respondents identified themselves as Artist, Scholar, and Educator. When those options are combined, it resulted in 30% of the identifications being related to professional interests of some kind. That is more than four times the number of hobbyist identifications.

Good scholarship and good research require open challenging dialogue. Effective advocacy requires "speaking to" issues. Successful market development and marketing require dialogue about good planning. Almost everything important to the future of tapestry requires an enhanced dialogue and communication regarding professional issues. This ATA Newsletter's theme is about professional issues, a rare supportive constructive opportunity for tapestry makers to engage in dialogue about professional issues that bear greatly upon their ability to work, to exhibit, to teach and study, and to pass on our field to younger generations.

The ATA membership response here is small. Not all responses agree, but they are all ardent and raise points worthy of careful consideration. Should we be optimistic and consider this to be just a beginning? Or should we worry that our field has been conditioned over past decades to be quiet and to let others outside our field dictate its course and control its future?

What do you think? If you are member of the younger incoming generations, I would be particularly interested in hearing what you have to say about the relative absence of an engaging professional dialogue. Where is your voice? After all, this is the field we who are the older generations will be passing on to you.

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