

# Either Exclusivity or Sustainability

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My first professional article on contemporary tapestry weaving was published in 1981. For almost four decades now, I've tracked our field's challenges, attempting to explore the causes of our poor economic and professional opportunities. Thus, I appreciate the British Tapestry Group inviting me, a tapestry artist from New York City, to report on my side of the Atlantic.



Ticonderoga Venus' (approx. 200 x 100 cm), Photo © Stanley Bulbach

In the U.S. the contemporary fiber and textile field is part of the larger contemporary craft media arts. Both have been suffering significantly, and prospects for this new decade remain alarming.

The Museum of Contemporary Craft downsized into a college's digital archive. The Museum of Arts and Design suffers a revolving door of changing staff. The new American Folk Art Museum building was sold for debts. The Textile Museum passed its holdings to

George Washington University. The Museum of American Textile History went bankrupt. Friends of Fiber Arts International terminated. Across the U.S. schools have slashed fiber and textile programs. Our suppliers and teachers are struggling.

The primary organization representing weavers, dyers, and spinners in the U.S is the Handweavers Guild of America. In 1989 it had 10,469 members; now it has 3,459. In a single generation HGA lost two thirds of its members, dues income, advertising value, and influence.

But why? Back in 2002, Fiberarts Magazine's editor, Rob Pulleyn, reported on HGA's Convergence, "Where Were the Young Folks?" He warned it was "a conference of old people". He reported how simultaneously a nearby ceramics convention included younger membership and was supporting professional and economic opportunity - unlike the fiber field. No one seemed to listen. Eighteen years later two thirds of the members of the American Tapestry Alliance are in their 60s or older. Only about 7% are in their 40s or younger. Why are the fiber and textile arts in the U.S. bereft of younger people? Is it because the field is also exclusive regarding race and gender and economic status and geographic distribution - all at the same time?

Historically the fiber and textile arts have not been exclusive, but a universal art form, technology, commodity, and heritage. Where are these issues engaged openly? U.S. organizations do not provide members with informative Board meeting minutes. Members' reasonable recommendations seem ignored, except to trigger more donation requests.

But there are helpful policies that U.S. organizations could successfully incorporate to address our grave actuarial challenges constructively.

In the U.S. curators, institutions, and other experts claim to research our field with the highest standards of academic research practice and accuracy, but inaccurately judge us to be a less significant art form. Our organizations seem unable to provide accurate lists of where accurate research is actually occurring. Why?

As educational associations, U.S. fiber organizations claim they should not be critical of research practices.



*Bulbach with flying carpet at the Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies, New York University, 2019. Photo © Dan Franklin Smith*

But education absolutely requires valid research practice standards, professional ethics, transparency, and robust challenges. We discuss questionable research practice only as "the elephant in the room".

Our organizations in the U.S. do not encourage us to promote the prize-worthy qualities of the fibers we use. But those qualities are the essence of craftsmanship and also the basis of the luxury goods market. Historically, tapestry was a successful luxury commodity. Why not now?

Our organizations do not encourage publicizing why we create our imagery in such a time-consuming, expensive manner. Omitting public education and market development, our organizations leave weavers to compete against paintings created far more quickly and profitably.

Our organizations do not support inter-professional networking. They make few connections with the interior design/architecture schools and publications, museum and curatorial organizations, and college art organizations, and resist pursuing advocacy.

Our organizations are quiet about copyrighting woven designs or licensing those designs for commercial and industrial use.

Our organizations no longer strongly support collecting and collectors. U.S. museums rarely examine unsolicited tapestry art, but in lieu of accurate research are open to collectors and commercial galleries introducing work.

Our organizations do not encourage discussion and dialogue to resolve our field's chronic challenges. While U.S. organizations have solicited surveys and recommendations, they gloss over key responses. For example, in a 2015 survey 72% of the ATA

membership expressed interest in selling their art work. But without alerting the membership the Board removed ATA's founding Mission Statement commitment to supporting collecting and collectors.

In the U.S. these factors are related to our art form's loss of professional and economic opportunity. Our younger U.S. adults confront historically difficult economic conditions, while core organizational memberships march on towards retirement without adequate replacement.

The extreme exclusivity of U.S. organizations is not only one of age, but also of economic status, race, gender, and even geography. This exclusivity seems to render us blind and defenseless to the "elephant in the room", our ticking gray problem, and our unique deficiencies of professional and economic opportunity. If solely a costly time-consuming hobby, younger and diverse generations can ill afford to join our field.



*Colored Lincoln Longwool showing its unique luster. Photo © Stanley Bulbach.*

Sociologist Margaret Mead wisely advised: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has".

The U.S. fiber organizations have always had ample ability to address their future successfully. The primary question remains why we haven't started using our talents and resources to prepare for the grave challenges continuing to march towards us.

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*More information on Bulbach's art and published writing is available at [www.bulbach.com](http://www.bulbach.com)*