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A DEBT TO THE FUTURE COMES DUE

by
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In August of 2000, the American Association of Museums suddenly issued its “New Ethical Guidelines” calling for greater transparency in how museums select and finance their exhibitions. According to recent court cases, books, and investigative reports in the *New York Times*, a number of museums claiming to select art for exhibition based on reliable expert research seem instead to be choosing work for exhibition and recording based on undisclosed financing and box office ticket sales. The controversy grew so embarrassing that the American Association of Museums formally acknowledged the need for more openness in museum art exhibit selection and financing processes and asserted the right to withdraw its accreditation of any member museum that violates its new ethical guidelines.

Why should the members of Complex Weavers care about how museums decide what art to show to the public and add to the formal record? Most of us believe firmly that one of our most important priorities is to record and preserve the living traditions in our art and craft for future generations. Not only do we ourselves wish to benefit from those traditions, but we also wish to pass them on to the young people entering this field after us. This belief in the importance of education and history is included in the mission statements of our advocacy organizations.

Museum research and exhibitions serve to educate the public and preserve our best work. Unfortunately, the recording of this important heritage and its transmission to future generations is gravely distorted by the virtual exclusion

of contemporary American fiber from curatorial research on contemporary American craft. About fifteen years ago, the American Craft Museum published a monograph entitled *Craft Today: Poetry of the Physical*. In the introduction, the respected contemporary craft authority, Edward Lucie-Smith stated:

“Furthermore, the recent history of craft as it is reflected in print is subject to some unexpected distortions. For example, although ceramics is not the largest field of activity — that honor almost certainly belongs to fiber — in the recent history of American craft ceramics is more fully recorded than work in any other medium.”*

Never before had it been so publicly disclosed that curatorial selection of contemporary American craft had created a distorted history by under-recording contemporary American fiber!

Museums of contemporary craft assert that they are executing reliable, knowledgeable, professional research on the entire field. But when it comes to one of the most important divisions of their field, contemporary American fiber (which includes handweaving), they exhibit and record very little of it. I polled the museums of contemporary craft and asked how they did their curatorial research on contemporary American fiber. An exhaustive search failed to turn up any qualified curatorial survey of contemporary fiber arts in that museum community. No one I contacted could accurately identify any contemporary craft curator who is examining and researching contemporary

American fiber in the process of mounting their institution's exhibitions and creating a professional record on contemporary American craft. So when the American Craft Museum published that there are "unexpected distortions" in the record, we can see that the record might be distorted simply because of an imbalance of knowledgeable museum curatorial staff. As a result, these institutions create the confusing public impression that they have looked carefully at contemporary American fiber, but cannot find much worth exhibiting and recording.

Ironically, at the very same time that contemporary American fiber was being under-recorded, the field was actually blossoming. It was expanding into new areas with new techniques and new materials, enjoying a renaissance of traditional materials and techniques, and becoming an expressive modern art. How can museums find so little to exhibit and record, if they are truly doing bona fide curatorial research? Although the weaving community should be commended for mounting short term juried exhibits of its good work at area and national conferences that are open to the public, those exhibits do not have the impact on the official record of a public exhibit in a nationally respected museum studying contemporary American craft.

The under-representation of fiber in museums might have contributed to the decision of many schools to put their looms and equipment out on the curb, and loss or decreased size or circulation of some of our publications. That is precisely why the New Ethical Guidelines of the American Association of Museums are so very important to members of the Complex Weavers and to the rest of our

country's fiber community as well. As recent articles in the *New York Times* have dramatically disclosed, art museums can greatly misrepresent the factors (such as research, financing, and public tastes) that influence the curatorial record they create and exhibit.

The holes in the fiber record constitute a most serious ethical challenge to our community. For the decade and a half following the disclosure that fiber arts are under-represented in museum collections, the fiber community has not initiated discussion about this problem. These concerns do not fall solely upon the shoulders of museum personnel, the Boards of our not-for-profit advocates, or the fiber magazines that publicize museum exhibitions. Most importantly, these concerns fall upon our own shoulders. Our community has sat back quietly in recent decades while craft museums under-represent us.

When this distorted record is passed on to the next generation, what will we have done to try to rectify it? With the new ethical guidelines of the American Association of Museums, we all should be doing much, much more for posterity. We need to raise questions and discuss the problem publicly! We owe at least that much to future generations of weavers.

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* "Craft Today. Historical Roots and Contemporary Perspectives" by Edward Lucie-Smith, in *Craft Today: Poetry of the Physical*, Paul J. Smith, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, NY, 1986; pp. 15-40.