



## Where Is the Voice of Fibre Art Today?

by Stanley Bulbach, Ph.D.

Voice is a capability that many creatures have hardwired into their bodies. But for us humans, voice is far more than basic survival. For us, voice has also evolved into a florescence of our most important art forms, from poetry to singing, from rhetoric to drama, and more. With our voice, we communicate our feelings, understandings, ideas, dreams, and our plans.

When our voices are not heard, we say we “do not have a voice.”

Over recent years, our fibre\* community has atrophied. Our publications have been dwindling. Degree programs have been shutting down. We have been losing valued suppliers and treasured teachers. Scholarly research on our field has suffered drastically both in quality and quantity.

All this loss is occurring while our field watches in silence. Which of our publications print articles engaging these important issues? Which of our organizations call out to explore ideas to engage this? Which of our conferences have speakers addressing this?

The answers to these questions are not auspicious. We fibreists seem to have lost our voice. Worse, we tell ourselves that it is improper to speak out. A terrible economic crisis is now enveloping the global community, and we fibreists are now mute, unprepared to engage the significant challenges confronting the future of our field.

### Fine Threads

Throughout history fibre work has been among the most important elements in the arts of our many civilizations. From the earliest of times fibre work has been prized and its finished products have historically commanded esteem and high prices. Consider that the largest cache of cuneiform documents excavated at Ur III from the early Second Millennium BCE were found in a room the archaeologists nicknamed “The Wool Office,” and were inventory records documenting an enormous and lucrative wool textile economy. Think about the Silk Route too.

Last summer, the New York Times reported:

“An Indian fabric maker paid nearly \$250,000, a record price, for a 200-pound bale of exceptionally high grade wool at an auction . . . the finest ever sold at an auction in Australia . . . more than 300 times the benchmark price of standard Australian wool . . . . It will be enough to make as many as 50 suits . . . .”

(New York Times, June 27, 2008, “Record Wool Price Set in Australia”.)

Demand for luxury fibre work does not necessarily disappear in financially hard times.

The New York Times recently reported:

“The nation [U.S.] is engrossed in an orgy of

\*This and a number of other spellings reflect the preferred Canadian spellings.

scandal, a 24-hour cable news burlesque of greed, graft, cronyism and corruption, with appointed villains so lurid and over-the-top they could be characters in 'Bleak House.' . . . [There was] a report on MSNBC . . . that told of a recent Hermès shopping spree by Kathleen Fuld, the wife of Richard S. Fuld, the disgraced chief executive of the now defunct Lehman Brothers. The report said her purchases included three \$2,225 cashmere throws."

(New York Times, December 21, 2008, "Critic's Notebook: Scandals to Warm to" by Alessandra Stanley.)

But in numerous ways our field of fibre has disabled itself from being able to engage these issues.

### **Censorship On The Internet**

Last October a query appeared on one of our busier Internet weaving bulletin boards. A subscriber who weaves scarves expressed concern about the growing costs for his materials and the limit to the prices he felt he was able to charge for his finished scarves. Up to then, he was unable to charge enough to reimburse himself for his time and labour. By October, he reported not even recovering what he invested in his materials: "I'm not able to afford to make a really nice wool scarf for men when the starting price is US \$40-50, then time and labour to boot."

So while at least one successful wool suit maker is buying raw wools at about US \$1,250 a pound, our scarf weaver described a not-unfamiliar inability for people in our field to weave and market fully finished products containing about US \$40-50 worth of materials!

Here was the perfect opportunity for the bulletin board to open up a probing discussion about the lack of economic vitality in our field and to explore market education and development. But there wasn't much response to this upset weaver's story.

Why? Largely because our field discourages that. The advent of the Internet has been as revolutionary an opportunity as the invention of the printing press in its ability to give groups of people a voice to enable them to share information, to better their lives, and to free themselves from the tyranny of inadequate information. The Internet is used by our field that way for sharing technical information. That's great. But it is not used for advocacy and solving problems in our field. And almost every fibre related bulletin board has strict policies about unsubscribing people who venture beyond comments about technical issues, kittens, local weather, grandchildren, etc.

### **Tunnel Vision**

The concerns our scarf weaving friend posed raise crucial issues about marketing, market development, market education, market image and the like. So how have our fibre magazines helped to educate and develop our markets, to improve our market image, etc?

Well, our fibre magazines haven't been very helpful, even though that would be of inestimable value to their advertisers as well as to their subscribers. But in the US, our fibre media has actually been featuring an increasingly inaccurate, narrow view of our market interest and our market image. Our fibre media focuses almost exclusively on how suburban/ rural white women can make things for other suburban/rural white women and their children. But most American women now hold down at least one job consuming their time. And the majority of Americans now live in urban areas. And the minority middle class constitutes an enormous portion of the US economy. And males characteristically spend far much more on their tools and toys and have much larger discretionary incomes as buyers of finished products and art.

Unfortunately, the focus of the US fibre press is not economic viability for the fibre community at large. The Spinning and Weaving Association (SWA), a business group formed by Interweave Press and its advertisers, detailed its focus in a

public posting in 2004:

“Women of the Boomer Generation, a vast group, are moving into the years of self-fulfilment 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. Add to that, the younger generation, who are discovering these stress reducing activities and creating a high growth and energetic time in our industry. By adding these high profit margin crafts to your retail environment is a smart business decision.”

I wrote to Interweave asking about the wisdom of their view of the future and that narrow market focus, but I never received a response. Today, most “Women of the Boomer Generation” approaching retirement have disappearing pensions, plunging private retirement accounts and ballooning mortgages; and the younger generation has been saddled with raging unemployment, skyrocketing health insurance costs, and an economic crisis of unparalleled government and private debt. Rather than focusing on the market for a broad spectrum of the fibre field, the US fibre media hypes fibre as a trite after-work hobby.

Shortly after that public posting by the SWA, Interweave then sold itself to Aspire Media, Inc., a company that buys “hobbyist” publications and is funded by various financiers and investment firms, who wouldn’t know a knitting needle if they sat on one. After all, Wall Street’s priority is to maximize quarterly profits, and not to look into the future.

If our publications were indeed looking seriously into the future, they would see that after a couple of Post World War II generations without any market education by the fibre industry, less and less of our field’s public has any real knowledge about fibre values any more. For quite some time now, no one has been educating the public about the treasurable qualities of well-fabricated products of premium fibre. When you query the

public market today about natural fibres, most responses today can only cite purported liabilities.

### **Academic Research**

There are a number of universities and colleges offering course work in fibre. What have they said about this? What do they feel about graduating their students into the real world marketplace of goods and ideas where they will be inadequately prepared to survive without a second job and/or a wealthy spouse?

What is the academic research saying about our field? Unfortunately, academic papers written about craft art seem based largely upon what is currently hot in the marketplace — and that includes very little fibre work. Why is that defective research practice permitted without challenge? The mission statement of the College Art Association is: “Representing its members’ professional needs, CAA is committed to the highest professional and ethical standards of scholarship, creativity, connoisseurship, criticism, and teaching.”

And yet, over the past nine years as a member of the College Art Association, I have asked each CAA president what the guidelines are that it supports in professional scholarly research on our work. And each year passes without an answer despite their Mission Statement. Meanwhile both the CAA and our fibre field struggle with valid concerns that gender discrimination still might be a problem in art research.

### **“It Was a Conference of Old People”**

Why is the fibre field required to be the economic basket case of the craft art field? Why is the fibre field required to be treated as its Ugly Duckling? Why are we required in our field not to rebut those problems?

In November of 2002, Rob Pulleyn, the founding publisher of Fibrearts Magazine, wrote a Commentary on his visit that summer to Convergence, the convention sponsored by the Handweavers Guild of America. He gave it the title, “Where Were The Young Folks?” His

words merit very serious consideration:

“But there was, for me, something missing, something quite disturbing. It was the morning of the third day of the conference before I saw anyone less than 35 years old. . . . There were virtually no young people. It was a conference of old people. What was particularly striking was the juxtaposition of this conference to that of the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA). . . . I’d guess that at least a quarter of the attendees at NCECA this year were under 25. What that meant was an exhilarating conference, with as many neophytes as grizzled old timers in attendance. The hotel lobbies were filled with old friends, new introductions, and young people hoping to meet their heroes. There were exhibitions, workshops, and exhibitors, as at Convergence, but the tone was one of excitement, and the age distribution was pretty close to that of society.”

Is this where we have taken the great achievements in our field of the 20th Century? To be a diminishing club of aging hobbyists who feel that constructive dialogue is disruptive? At age 61, I’d like to know if that has become our

goal as caretakers of the inheritance handed down to us by our preceding generation of fibreists. They took great efforts to record and preserve our important skills and traditions and pass them on to us for our term of safekeeping. But we entered the 21st Century requiring ourselves to stifle our voices because intelligent dialogue is upsetting to hobbyists and is not immediately profitable for Wall Street investors to whom we have been selling our fibre publications. Are fibreists really supposed to park our intelligence at the door and enter our field solely for self enjoyment and stress-reduction? Will we ever again permit ourselves to have vigorous ongoing debate about our future anywhere?

It’s not true that outsiders have deprived us of a voice. The amply documented reality is that we fibreists ourselves have set up conditions in our field that we use to render ourselves mute and to penalize ourselves if we use our voice for intelligent, challenging dialogue. And if ever there was a time to confront that self-imposed silence, now is certainly the time to start. Starting now, shouldn’t we be supporting a vibrant dialogue about advocacy to address our field’s future?

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