



Book Review:

*The Fabric of Civilization:
How Textiles Made the World*

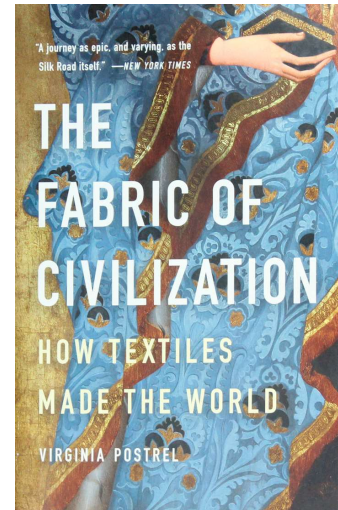
by Virginia Postrel
Basic Books, 2020

The review of this wonderful book was requested for publication by the American Tapestry Alliance. The editors removed 1/3 of the text, censoring it on the grounds that it would mislead the ATA membership.

ATA refused to explore possible modifications compelling the writer of this review and opinion piece to withdraw legal permission for publication by ATA.

Shortly after that, the ATA also decided not to cover “The Fiber Effect” for its membership. That tapestry exhibition at the Ukrainian Institute of America in New York City opened on February 24, 2022, the same day Russia suddenly attacked Ukraine.

The ATA has traditionally referred to its official publication as a primary membership benefit. Since 2022, ATA has decreased that quarterly publication and primary membership benefit down to a triennial one. Below is the original uncensored review restoring the 30% that the ATA governance did not want membership to see and discuss.



This book covers the millennia of developments of the various technologies that comprise textiles and their components. The author then lays out a persuasive case as to why textiles are in many ways principal to the development of civilization itself.

By the end of the book the author concludes: “Hidden in every piece of fabric are the actions of curious, clever, and desiring men and women, past and present, known and unknown, from every corner of the globe.” Virginia Postrel offers this view as a professionally achieved and widely-respected author in the greater world beyond fiber art’s restricted circles.

She is a columnist for *Bloomberg Opinion* and has been a columnist for the *Atlantic*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *New York Times*. Her book contributes an “outsider’s” perspective on how our fiber art is not only the expressiveness and utility of textiles, but also how its development has been crucial to the existence of the civilized world in which we all live.

Postrel asserts that “we suffer textile amnesia because we enjoy textile abundance” which “exact[s] a price, obscuring essential components of the human heritage, hiding much of how we got here and who we are.” She highlights that, “. . . the study of textiles is the story of human ingenuity.”

Her book serves a feast of technical knowledge about fibers, then thread, then cloth and dyes. This book is clearly a perfect gift to give to friends who wonder why we fiber artists work in such a demanding, but economically and professionally unviable art field.

Popular literacy grew as a business tool rather than something exclusive to ruling classes. Similarly, the author details how often scarce coinage had textiles — easier and safer to transport — be an official medium of exchange. “Bills of exchange” replaced payment cash with credits and debits, increasing the amount of value in circulation, as well as the “velocity” with which transactions could occur. Negotiable bills of exchange were “to become the foundation of modern commercial banking.”

This book appears at a crucial time for today’s fiber art support organizations confronting the onset of the 21st Century and major generational changes. Our organizations need financial support to operate and to address our multiple deficiencies of diversity regarding race, economic status, gender, and age. Where is that funding to come from when the field excludes advocacy for professional and economic opportunity? As economic conditions become more challenging for most people, how can fiber and textiles attract more diversity from those who cannot afford the expense and time our field requires as a hobby?

Over decades key fiber support organizations have lost much membership and even sought consultation on how to improve diversity, while promoting donation dependency for our field. The most recent detailed ATA membership survey reported 72% of the membership interested in selling their art. Around the same time advocacy for collecting and supporting collectors was removed from ATA’s founding Mission Statement!

Advocacy for professional and economic opportunity is enjoyed by the rest of the art world, but uniquely absent for fiber artists. Considering that this is a “story of the world’s most influential commodity,” why must fiber art and its artists be only self-funded and charity dependent?

This wonderful book illuminates how fiber and textiles are historically inseparable from commerce and economics. Postrel again nails it: “Every scrap of cloth, I now realize, represents the solution to innumerable difficult problems. Many are technical or scientific . . . ,” citing what is commonly discussed in our field. But she breaks new ground when writing, that “some of the trickiest [problems], however, are social: How do you finance a crop of silkworms or cotton, a new spinning mill, or a long-distance caravan?”

“Hidden in every piece of fabric are the actions of curious, clever, and desiring men and women, past and present, known and unknown, from every corner of the globe.”

Virginia Postrel concludes: “This heritage does not belong to a single nation, race, or culture, or to a single time or place. The story of textiles is not a male story or a female story, not a European, African, Asian, or American story. It is all of these, cumulative and shared — a human story, a tapestry woven from the countless brilliant threads.”

Tapestry Artists, I highly recommend Postrel’s wonderful book!

Stanley Bulbach, (Ph.D, Kevorkian Institute of Near Eastern Studies, New York University)