

Weave to the Future

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Abstract

Traditional crafts of the past have paved the way to a textile future. Craft should be celebrated. Technological advancement may have begun with people like Jacquard and moved to the digital age of Nanotechnology, but craft still holds the magical essence for many creatives. Technological advancement, promises a window to the future, offering new approaches to creating, using and disposing of textiles.

‘What is textile design?’ It is a creative field that embraces both fashion and interior design, a visual world that promises innovation and craftsmanship.

So, ‘what are textiles?’ Everything from woven, printed, knitted, embroidered, manipulated, laser cut or applied, textile design, is an art that occupies our homes, furnishing interiors or fashioned into clothing. It is the creative process of designing fabrics for decorative, aesthetic, artistic or functional purposes that continually reinvents itself.

Textiles have been a fundamental part of human life from the primal need to cloth the body to keeping it warm, since Neanderthal times or Adam and Eve. The first materials used were made from animal skins, furs, leaves etc.

Many early textile pieces dating back to prehistoric times, were made of felting; the process by which wool fibres, interlock through friction to create a solid surface. It offered great insulation, warmth and was lightweight.

Other natural fibres like, flax, cotton and silk, were spun into yarn to create woven textiles. Weaving is a technique used in textiles for fabric production. It consists of intertwining two yarns at right angles to form a fabric. Fabric is usually woven on a loom. The earliest evidence of woven materials dates back to ancient Egypt and Greece as depicted on pottery artefacts. By 700 AD, horizontal and vertical looms could be found in Asia, Africa and Europe.

The Incas of Peru and Navajo Indians are rich in weaving traditions that date back to the 10th century. They used weaving as a form of communication, a way of recording their knowledge and pass the stories and ideas to the next generation. The Navajos worked on upright looms, weaving patterns that exhibit great symmetry, which is thought to embody traditional ideas about harmony. Usually made in black, white or grey, a limited amount of dyeing was used, with roots, herbs, and minerals from the rich soil of the area, primarily producing dark colours. Peruvians used the backstrap looms, among the simplest and oldest form of weave, made of wood, bone and strings, depicting scenes of everyday life, mythological creatures, animals and humans, very festive and colourful.

“The past is not dead, it is living in us, and will be alive in the future which we are now helping to make”. William Morris (1834-1896)

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The art of weave with a handloom, is a dying craft in today's modernity. Cypriot traditional loom weaving was at its height over a century ago, when every household owned a loom and women made their own clothes and other household items, including their dowry. The colourful cotton weaves of the Phyti village in Paphos, called 'Fythkiotika', is a characteristic type of Cypriot traditional craft. A weaver takes separate coloured threads of blue, red, green, orange and yellow and inserts them with her fingers across the warp, while counting to make a design, just like learning to play the strings of a guitar. The outcome is impressive.

Craft should be celebrated. Technological advancement may have begun with people like Jacquard (1752-1834) and moved to the digital age of Nanotechnology, but craft still holds the magical essence for many creatives.

In the 18th century Joseph Marie Jacquard was to revolutionise the weaving industry by creating the first programmable loom. This automated, mechanical loom that used a series of punched cards to weave a repetitive pattern of threads, gave way to the more laborious, time consuming process of counting threads and hand weaving.

"Being creative is not so much the desire to do something as the listening to that which wants to be done: the dictation of the materials.", Anni Albers (1899-1994).

Anni Albers was a textile designer, during the Bauhaus in 1920s. Craft was at the essence of the Bauhaus teachings, promoting functionalism and experimentation with materials, devoid of decoration. To become a designer, you had to learn the craft of your specialist area and then consider your approach to design. This is the dogma for many design schools today. Learn the rules to break the rules. Anni blurred the lines between traditional craft and art. She experimented with new materials for weaving, as encouraged by Gunta Stölzl and became a bold abstract artist. She used geometrical shapes and solid colors, incorporating metallic threads, horsehair and traditional yarns, while using raw materials and components of structure as a source of design and beauty in her weaves and wall-hangings.

Traditional crafts of the past have paved the way to a textile future. "The enormous changes in technology bring new opportunities to craftspeople", as John Makepeace said in 2019 COLLECT, international art fair. There is no doubt that craft should be the starting point for any designer. One cannot run without learning to walk. Craft and technology interrelate. A designer must learn the past to design the future.

Digital technology holds unlimited possibilities and expands creative freedom. It pushes what is possible in unlimited ways. This is the case for Nancy Tilbury of Studio XO. Tilbury is a pioneer of new media and high-tech materials, merging fashion and technology. "It is about making science fiction, science fact", she says in 'The Next Black - a film about the Future of Clothing', 2014. She creates smart fabrics, a digital couture experience, creating garments that are interactive and evolving.

The driving force behind Despina Papadopoulou's work is to connect people with their surroundings and each other, through technology. She "experimented with weaving conductive threads in a Jacquard loom, producing fabrics for fashion and interior applications that are capable of transmitting electronic signals", pp.39, "Textile Visionies", 2013. This digital interaction promotes a synergy between technology and textiles.

Technological advancement, promises a window to the future, offering new approaches to creating, using and disposing of textiles. Chemists are now producing fibres from natural sources, changing their structure to produce superior properties. They develop microfibers and nanotechnology, which can produce fabrics with advanced properties that can react to the environment in various ways.

Creatives have come full circle. Nature, craft and technology, when in conversation can ‘weave to the future’.

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