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Future Reliquaries

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Textiles are valuable in and of themselves as functional objects that can be used for practical purposes such as warmth, modesty, cleanliness. But we are a species with a brain that constantly makes associations, a species that lives in simile and metaphor. We, as an animal that assigns emotional meaning to everything we see and handle, enlarge from the textile and its practical use at times of transition – life to death, single to married, in and out of the womb. Everything used at a momentous occasion absorbs meaning and becomes symbolic of that occasion: the winding shroud woven by the dutiful daughter, (Fig. 1) the marriage veil handed down from generation to generation, the first baby blanket knit by an adoring grandmother. Textiles connote love in these situations. They can also connote power and status and rank, embodying the hierarchy where everyone knows their place in the society: (Fig. 2) Chinese rank badges, the Inca ruler's feathered cape, the braid on a military uniform.

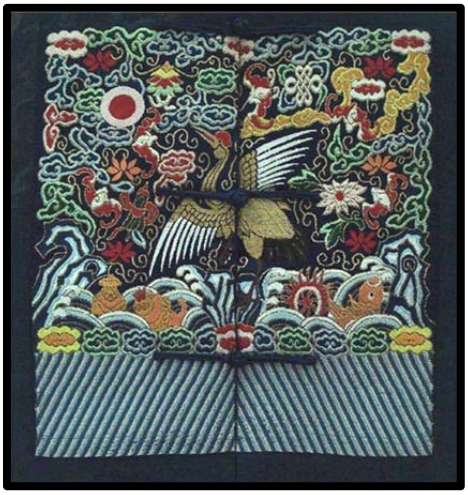

Figure 1, left. *'The Bride' from the Cover Up Series. Image by Ted Clark, Image This.*
Figure 2, center. *Chinese rank badge. Image by author.*
Figure 3, right. *Heraldic lion detail from a medieval tapestry. Photo from the website of Charlotte Home Furnishings at http://www.saveontapestries.com/tapestries/Heraldic-Lion-3553.htm*

Long ago tapestries were coveted as extremely valuable assets to display the wealth and power of the secular and religious patrons who commissioned them. (Fig. 3) Because of the time they take to make, because of precious materials such as gold and silver woven into them, because tapestry is a pictorial medium that could aggrandize the patron through the choice of myth and legend depicted, and maybe sometimes, because of the skill of the artist, tapestries were valued. They were ritual and spiritual objects because we made them so.

Today tapestry is not valued in the same way, if at all. The Medieval and Renaissance tapestries that survive are seen as relics of a bygone age, historical artifacts, rather than works of art. There are still some religious and secular patrons that commission tapestries for special occasions, such as Queen Margarethe II of Denmark who commissioned a set of tapestries for her birthday that depict the history of Denmark. Some corporations such as banks and cruise lines still commission large works, and for the same reason that those princes and popes did: to display wealth and power in the lobbies of large office buildings, the castles and cathedrals of the twenty-first century.

Figure 4. *Jacquard wall hanging tapestry blanket advertised on the website okokchina.com.*

But the large ateliers are mostly gone or subsist under government sponsorship. Today is the era of the artist weaver, an individual who has chosen tapestry as the medium through which to express an artistic vision. Though there are still commissions, most tapestries are woven "on spec" with the hope of finding an enlightened buyer who will recognize their value and purchase them for home or office. Tapestries are smaller, prices are lower (though still out of the reach of most people) and the hand-made has lost much of its caché – and its value in the age of mass production. And now we are moving from the industrial world to the cyber world. Does tapestry still have a value when a computer can tell a machine to make an exact duplicate of a hand-made object? (Fig. 4) Well, there is the nub of the issue. Can something woven by a computer ever be the same as something woven by hand? Is a giclée the same as the painting it is printed from? Is a digital recording the same as an analog recording or a live concert?

Being a hand-weaver, a hand-spinner, and a hand-dyer, I have long cherished the hand-made; but we live in the electronic age and the haptic has a hard time maintaining its status. I think we crave the maker's hand in the objects we surround ourselves with. The cyber world of today can be a sterile place, just you and your computer, a recalcitrant machine that sometimes seems like a two year old having a tantrum who just won't tell you what is wrong. We want a connection with the creator, a story, an anecdote. This is what gives value to the object in the owner's eye. What brings back more memories from a vacation, the mass produced shawl from the kiosk at the airport or the shawl woven by the artisan whose studio you visited and with whom you shared a cup of tea and photos of your children? This is why we try to humanize our machines and give them names and anthropomorphize them. My husband is convinced that the computer has it in for him, that whenever he turns it on it breaks. My daughter-in-law's lap top broke recently and she wrote me that "I thought of your future relic series, how we worship technology. I think that my relationship with my laptop has gone beyond the stage of admiration. I think that my laptop is an extension of me, as it stores my thoughts (work stuff), memory (pictures, songs, etc), and emotions (email exchanges)."

And that brings me to the concerns I am exploring in my tapestry series, "Future Reliquaries." (Fig. 5) Three apparently separate but in my mind, connected histories, those of weaving, computing, and religion, led to this current exploration. What do we worship in this electronic age? Even though a computer is a machine with an IQ of zero, we accord it respect and think of it as intelligent, certainly smarter than we are. We program it to take over mundane tasks we do not enjoy and delight in its ability to do so. We program it to remember our personal data and to transact our business, trusting it not to let us down. We program it to entertain us and keep us company in our solitary state in front of the screen. We program it to defend our country, to wage our wars, to

look after us. We elevate the computer to a god and then we worship it. We are creating a new religion, worshipping our own technology. (Fig. 6)

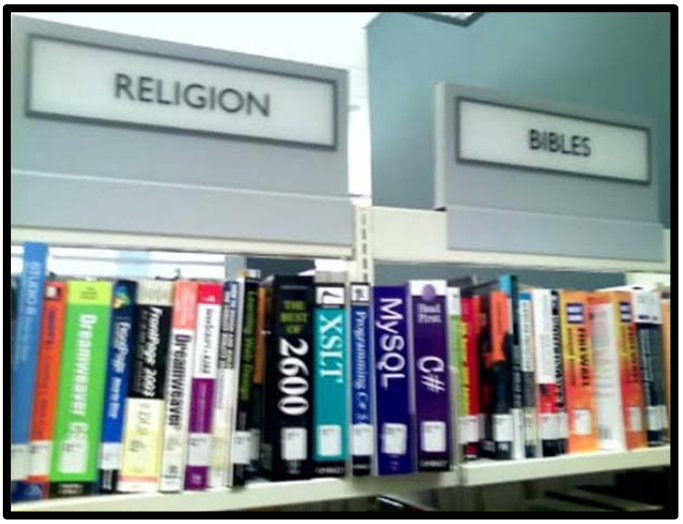

Figure 5, left. *'Kilim Algorithm' from my Future Reliquaries series. Image by Ted Clark, Image This.*
Figure 6, right. *An actual shelf in the Columbus Public Library. Photo by Brian Bolton*

In the Middle Ages and Renaissance people venerated saints and martyrs as we venerate the computer today. Miraculous powers were assigned and the sale of holy relics, shards of the bones of saints and pieces of the True Cross, became a large commercial enterprise. (It is said that there are enough pieces of the true cross extant to build a cathedral.) These holy relics were kept inside beautifully sculpted metal reliquaries and displayed in churches to be worshipped as the concrete symbols of faith and history. Usually these reliquaries were shaped like treasure chests or castles but sometimes they mimicked the human anatomy. (Fig. 7) In the Musée de Cluny in Paris there is a golden foot complete with ankle bone and toenails, housing the foot bones of a saint. But since I saw them over two decades ago, I have been particularly fascinated with the golden arms and hands, often encrusted with jewels that hold the arm bones of saints.

Figure 7. *Golden foot reliquary from the Musée de Cluny, Paris, France. Image by author.*

The hand has always been a potent symbol for me in my artwork and the hand of the maker as evidenced in the weaving of textiles is especially poignant. The Navajo always include a "mistake" in their woven rugs as only the Great Spirit can create something perfect. It is this flaw that serves as a path for Spirit to enter this world through

the weaver and the weaving. In Japanese philosophy too, it is the flaws in a hand-thrown pot or any hand-made object that give it character and added value. The great craftsmen are honoured as living treasures, repositories of knowledge that is evidenced through the works of their hands. (Fig 8) The hand links us to the actual world and to each other through touch, and to the virtual world, the world wide web, through computer keystrokes; pixels joining together to create and share information, both personal and public. Indeed, how could we be living in the digital age without our digits, our fingers?

Figure 8, left. *Work in progress. Image by author.*
Figure 9, right. *Early jacquard loom showing punch cards. Image in public domain*

Both weaving and computing use binary code and abstract symbols to tell stories and preserve the history and mythology of a culture for future generations. Weaving is a binary system of up/down, just as computing is a binary system of on/off. (Fig. 9) In 1801 Joseph Marie Jacquard played an important role in the development of the first mechanized loom using punch cards instructing the loom to raise or lower individual warp threads depending on the position of the holes in the cards.[1] To quote from the website ideafinder.com[2] "These punched cards controlled the weaving, enabling an ordinary workman to produce the most beautiful patterns in a style previously accomplished only with patience, skill, and hard work." This was the first machine to have the ability to follow an algorithm to store and reproduce information and was adapted in 1836 by Charles Babbage in his "analytical engine" which is viewed as the first computer.[3]

[1] Essinger, James (2004). *Jacquard's Web: How a Hand-Loom Led to the Birth of the Information Age*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[2] http://www.ideafinder.com/history/inventions/jacquard.htm
[3] To Charles Babbage the incredible sophistication of the information processing involved in the *mis en carte* -- what we call programming -- of this exceptionally elaborate and beautiful image confirmed the potential of using punched cards for the inputting, programming, and outputting and storage of information in his design and conception of the first general-purpose programmable computer--the Analytical Engine. The highly aesthetic result also confirmed to Babbage that machines were capable of amazingly complex and subtle processes—processes which might eventually emulate the subtlety of the human mind." (Swade, *The Cogwheel Brain. Charles Babbage and the Quest to Build the First Computer* [2000] 107-8).


Figure 10, left. *'Ikat Algorithm' from the Future Reliquary series. Image by Ted Clark, Image This.*
Figure 11, right. *Detail of 'Heat Map Algorithm." Image by Ted Clark, Image This.*

A mathematical algorithm is merely a step-by-step series of instructions forming a pattern that allows complex problems to be solved by performing a series of small simple steps. It can be seen in the punch cards of the jacquard loom through up/down. (Fig. 10) And early computer programmers used punch cards to communicate algorithms to those first giant computers through on/off. The website wisegeek.com[4] states that: "A computer program is another pervasive example of an algorithm. Every computer program is simply a series of instructions (of varying degrees of complexity) in a specific order, designed to perform a specific task. Most conceptions of the human brain define all behavior — from the acquisition of food to falling in love — as the result of a complex algorithm." It goes on to categorize various kinds of algorithms. In giving the tapestries in this series such titles as Bokhara Algorithm, I wanted to emphasize this link between ethnic textiles and the modern computer on a process level as well as a symbolic one. (Fig. 11) For instance, in Ikat Algorithm, on a material – pun intended - level, I am combining four elements: an ikat patterned fabric from Indonesia, a circuit board pattern I extracted from a discarded computer, the woven image of a religious artifact, and actual computer parts sewn on. On a meta level all the metaphorical implications merge to form a complex whole, rich with resonances of thinking, weaving, and worshipping.

Some years ago, before there were recycling depots for e-waste and before we shipped this hazardous e-waste to the orient to be dismantled for the heavy metals stored within, I bought a new computer and wanted to recycle the old one. I thought I could at least remove and recycle the plastic shell, but recycling was soon forgotten as

[4] http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-an-algorithm.htm

treasures were revealed within. (Fig. 12) The bits and pieces were like jewels, like precious relics, like the bones of the computer. I had to save them. I took apart a keyboard. I took apart a radio, then a mobile phone, and answering machine, a CD player. I saved the innards and decided to incorporate them in a series of tapestries that would enshrine them as the future relics of the connected society. Why not? Computers had become our new gods and there needed to be a new religion to worship them properly.

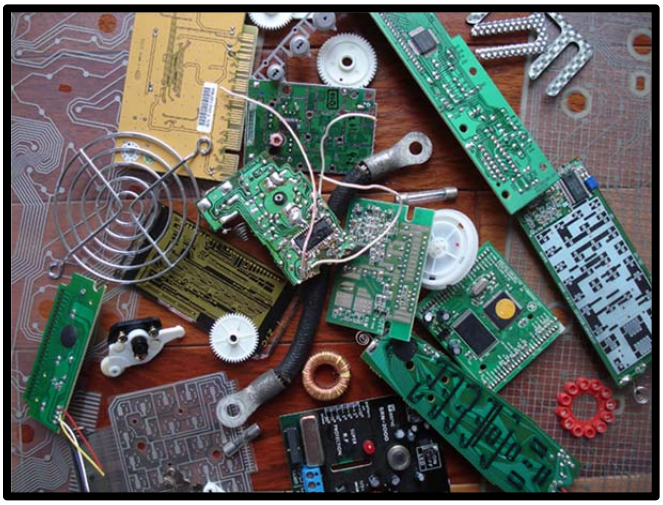

Figure 12. *Computer parts. Image by author.*

These tapestries depict the future holy status of today's e-junk in the context of the ancient fabrics that gave birth to the binary system. (Fig. 13) The pattern of the motherboard or silicon chip morphs into the pattern of a traditional ethnic textile. The slits in the woven golden arms can be seen as jewels encrusted on the golden reliquaries but also as the receptacles connecting the computer tower to the outer world. The mysterious objects from inside the body of the computer can be seen as shards from the bodies of the saints we ask to intercede for us. And we pray at these shrines religiously every day, these new gods will not die of neglect. Religion is not only a store of faith, it is a store of history and social values and I feel we need to rethink our relationship to what is really just a tool.

Figure 13. *'Bokhara Algorithm' from the Future Reliquary series. Image by Ted Clark, Image This.*

Figure 14. *'Future Relic: Turkey' Image by author.*

Verdure tapestry by the yard, upholstery fabric that looks like embroideries of nymphs and satyrs, even jacquard "paintings" that are copied from works by famous artists can be mass-produced today at a price affordable to every middle-class home. Just as weaving is thus one step removed from the human hand, with today's computers programmed to do many tasks, thinking is now one step removed from the human mind. Yet for the thousands of handweavers around the globe, for the hundreds of tapestry weavers that Archie Brennan characterizes as "tap, tap, tapping in the night," the act of weaving is akin to the act of story telling. No machines intervene as the weavers record their personal stories, their faith, and their culture in the patterned cloth; complex stories that are told through a simple binary code. (Fig. 14) An ethnic textile may seem to be an abstract assemblage of lines and shapes but these lines and shapes have often evolved over the centuries from realistic depictions of birds, animals, water and wind, and they carry the history and culture of the society from which they come. A tapestry weaver builds an image pick by pick just as a computer builds an image pixel by pixel. It is this connection that unites the ancient and the modern and gives tapestry a place in the cyber age. The binary code is merely the means for preserving the genius of the human brain.

When a tapestry artist sits at the loom for the long hours that go into creating a tapestry, the mind tends to wander and, for me, I often fall into a meditative state. I gain a sense of pride in history and tradition of weaving, knowing that a desire to mechanize the loom led to the advent of the computer. And I take pleasure in thinking about the symbolic links between weaving and computing, and the religious sensibility in the rituals that we bring to them both. (Fig. 15) It is these layers, levels of feeling and meaning that enrich my life. There is nothing new under the sun, merely variations on a theme.

Figure 15. *Work in progress. Image by author.*