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Keynote Address—Summary Notes

Jack Lenor Larsen

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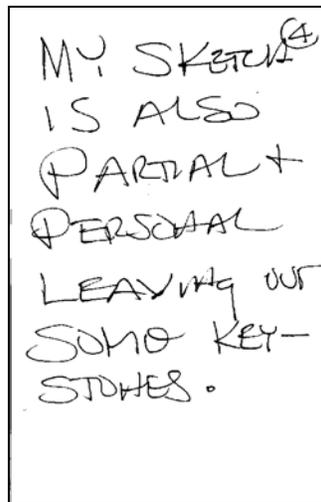
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Keynote Address—Summary Notes

San Francisco Bay as the Fountainhead and Wellspring

Jack Lenor Larsen

Jack Lenor Larsen led off the 9th Biennial Symposium of the Textile Society of America in Oakland, California, with a plenary session directed to TSA members and conference participants. He congratulated us, even while proposing a larger and more inclusive vision of our field, and exhorting us to a more comprehensive approach to fiber. His plenary remarks were spoken extemporaneously from notes and not recorded. We recognize that their inestimable value deserves to be shared more broadly; Jack has kindly provided us with his rough notes for this keynote address. The breadth of his vision, and his insightful comments regarding fiber and art, are worthy of thoughtful consideration by all who concern themselves with human creativity.



On the Textile Society of America

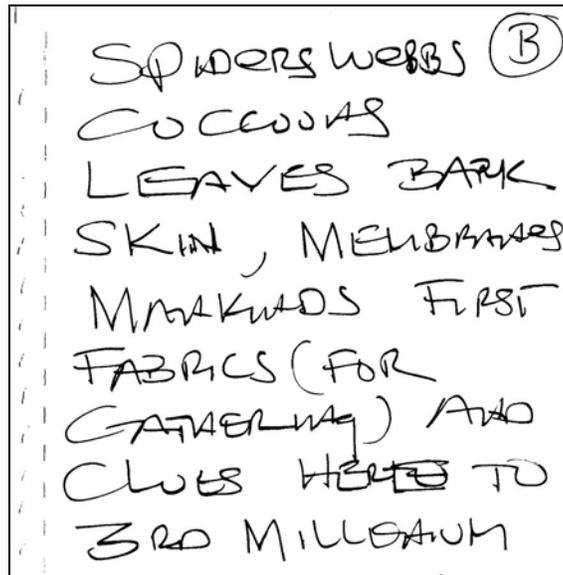
Larsen proffered congratulations on the Textile Society of America, now fifteen years old. He highlighted the attendance at this symposium and lauded our strength in numbers and diversity of the people gathered, representing among others both curators and creators. But he also cited the striking and significant absence of the textile industry, of designers, and of people working at the far edges of the invention of new industrial fabrics. And he made note of the fact that an overview of *fabric* in the broadest sense was also lacking.

On the State of the Field

Larsen applauded the increased prominence of the textile arts in mainstream art venues, including SOFA (Sculpture Objects & Functional Art) exhibitions in Chicago and New York, and at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Cooper-Hewitt, and the Museum of Art & Design. He also noted the significant research on resist techniques undertaken at the Ethnographic Museum in Basel, Switzerland.

He urged us to approach a standardization of terms for everyone to share, similar in some ways to the Dewey Decimal system, for the description and classification of fiber and its manipulation in varied cultural contexts, styles, and time periods. He advocates

use of the term “craftmaker,” advising us not to shy away from the making of the craft; *craftmaker* offers a better and more descriptive term than *craftperson* or the gendered *craftsman*. He considers *fabric* to be more inclusive than *textile*; he laments use of the term *fiber artist*, which he considers “deplorable,” likening it to the non-existent *paint artist*. He encourages the use of *fiber*, however, as an umbrella term, directing us to consider also the related terms, *fiber art* and *art fabric*.



A handwritten list of natural materials for fabric, enclosed in a rectangular box. The text is written in capital letters and includes a circled letter 'B' at the end of the first line. The list is as follows:

- SPIDERS WEBS (B)
- COCOONS
- LEAVES BARK
- SKIN, MEMBRANES
- MIMKINDS FIRST
- FABRICS (FOR
- GATHERING) AND
- CLUBS HERE TO
- 3RD MILLENIUM

In considering the evolution of fabric from fiber, he drew attention to natural fabrics – pliable planes, including spider webs, cocoons, leaves, bark, skin, membranes – which informed human thinking about the manipulation of fiber to form fabrics, concepts and natural substances that may still provide clues for third millennium textiles yet to be invented – including monolithic garments, made without cutting and sewing.

San Francisco Bay as the Fountainhead and Wellspring of Art Fabrics

Considering the surge of creativity, Jack Lenor Larsen asks “Why San Francisco?” He wondered aloud with us present, and we were privileged to hear the sharing of his thoughts.

Why was San Francisco at the forefront of Art Fabrics and what came to be called Surface Design and Art to Wear? Why not the larger and richer Los Angeles? With no textile industry, no fashion industry, no production, the phenomenon of creativity in fabrics in the Bay Area was essentially non-commercial. Larsen drew attention to the importance of San Francisco as a port, a port looking outwards toward Asia, the “Golden Gate.” He noted the commercial bustle and colors of Chinatown, the glamour associated with San Francisco since the early days of gold mining, the building boom after the earthquake of 1906 bringing architects and designers involved with the Arts and Crafts Movement to the city, and the international flavor and attention brought to San Francisco by the 1939 World’s Fair. He noted Jack London’s influence, and the association of romance and adventure with the city. San Francisco has always been known as “A Place Where Things Happen.”

SF BAY AREA
AS WELLSPRING
AND FOUNTAINHEAD
(ASKSICUA)
WHY? LA
LARGER, RICHER
NO TEXTILE MUSEUM
FIBER PRODUCE
FUNNY/FASHION

He shared his own memories of the textile scene in San Francisco before the Second World War, offering a personal sketch of empowering memories, of the Bay Area as a fountainhead and wellspring of his own creative growth. He recollected the time when Dorothy Wright Liebes was working here, exploring structure, materials, focus, shade and shadows. Her structure led architecture. He reminisced about Ed Rossbach and the Design Department at UC-Berkeley, concluding with a brief history of design at Berkeley, and highlighting the profound impact of Ed Rossbach and Katherine Westphal, colleagues, and students. Further reflecting on the breadth of this impact, Larsen recalls that when the Rossbachs studied resist patterning with Yoshiko Wada at Fiberworks, they shared with the world this ancient magic. So did they fall into Jacquard weaving as inextricably as a pit trap, and then pulled in a generation of younger leaders.