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Museum Viewpoint: Fiber Art and the Struggle for Recognition

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Museums are important repositories of culture and play a key role in shaping values concerning art. Indeed, museum acceptance can validate the worth of an artwork, and is often a prerequisite for an artist's long-term success. Contemporary fiber, like textiles in general, occupies a lowly position within the hierarchy of large museums, where it constantly struggles for the position and recognition that other media are automatically granted. Smaller museums and those not focused solely on art can be more accepting, but they, too, discriminate against textiles. In order to challenge this status quo, it is essential to understand how museums operate. The panelists are curators who collect fiber art. Together we represent three different kinds of institutions -- art museums, interdisciplinary museums, and university collections -- but each of us has experienced, and sought to overcome, various challenges facing any curator trying to collect textiles. We will offer insiders' perspectives on the way museums operate, and the obstacles faced by textiles/fiber art in our differing institutional contexts. Specifically, we will discuss the often arbitrary and haphazard hierarchies that museums have used to organize themselves and pigeonhole their collections, and the ways those hierarchies have shaped collecting. We will review how art world and museum politics and economics affect fiber, and explore the ways artists, collectors, historians, anthropologists, and critics can affect museum collecting. And we will discuss ways that curators can influence and expand institutional definitions of art and textiles, despite the financial, political, and bureaucratic boundaries museums impose.

Melissa Leventon is Curator of Textiles at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco where, over the past decade, she has built a collection of contemporary fiber and wearable art from scratch. She is writing a book on wearable art. Lotus Stack is Curator of Textiles and formerly Chair of the Curatorial Division at The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, where she has been responsible for building the contemporary fiber collection. She has written numerous exhibitions catalogues and is a past president of TSA. Suzanne Baizerman, formerly Director of the Goldstein Gallery, University of Minnesota, is the Imogene Gieling Curator of Crafts and Decorative Arts at the Oakland Museum of California, where she is responsible for work in all craft media. She is co-author of *Chimayó Weaving: the Transformation of Tradition*.