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## **Textiles, Scholarship, and Art Education: An Art College Perspective**

by  
Wendy Landry

In many communities the art college is the last formal refuge of active textile-making knowledge and heritage. This location appears to value playful, risky, or challenging material explorations which might result in creative design or meaningful visual expression. This should be the best environment for cultivating adventurous students able to integrate a wide range of experience and resources towards generating new ideas for interesting contemporary textiles. It could be a good place in which to discover how textiles contribute to human experience and history, and how they are meaningful. However, I submit that this art environment is still detrimental to the full realization of these potentials, and that we need to examine the attitudes and educational practices there to improve the status and effectiveness of education for and about textiles.

Both art objects and textiles are products of human acts – human behaviour. They both fulfill human purposes – sometimes practical, sometimes communicative, sometimes to elaborate, evoke, or provoke human experience. So it is reasonable to value and to study such artifacts, not only as artifacts with certain meanings, roles, or aesthetic effects, but also as products of meaningful acts and behaviours. This includes how producing such objects relates to motivating purposes, cultural environments, and acts of judgment and interpretation. This broad liberal arts approach is the study of art and artifacts as humanities study. It does not limit visual arts education or textiles study to the prevailing vocational model of producing professional artists, designers, artisans, historians, or teachers. As liberal arts study, it can be valued as general education, as a means of educating students towards understanding and engaging with the visual artifacts they will encounter, and as a means of understanding their culture. Since the number of students who will ultimately make a living directly producing objects is relatively small, it seems appropriate to ensure that its broader educational benefits are strong and clear. At degree-granting institutions, this strength should imply academic rigour, understanding, and articulation in addition to the development of artistry, talent, or craftsmanship. This approach could pave the way towards developing advanced levels of textiles scholarship as a consolidated field of study in visual arts programmes.

The Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, where I teach and study, appears typical of many art college and university programmes in that the dominance of the contemporary art world has impeded the development of vital aspects of crafting and textile scholarship. The absence of these vital aspects is keenly felt in the craft division where textiles is kept. But before I continue, I wish to clarify that my comments are not directed at faculty members, who I generally believe to be knowledgeable, thoughtful people who do care about educating students, despite holding conflicting views about how to do so. And I do not oppose the art world. My comments are an attempt to describe concisely a situation caused by wide-spread attitudes which have evolved within a certain educational system and historical, cultural trajectory. All I ask is that we

examine how well the resulting system fits our current needs and how that fit might be improved.

Throughout the twentieth century, visual arts production became fragmented in terms of a hierarchy of three roughly distinct although overlapping worlds – fine art, design, and craft. Fine art moved towards a focus on abstract ideation and eventually a critical stance. Intellectually, all visual arts practices came to be measured by the criteria, theories and strategies of avant-garde fine art, especially in terms of addressing modernity, although the distinctions among the categories tended to be ill-defined, poorly communicated, or crudely applied along superficial lines. Theoretical interpretation of the developmental trajectory of contemporary visual art tended to reject the artifacts, practices, purposes and underlying values of traditional crafting, design and commercial production. Due to the strength and apparent universality of the fine arts theoretical perspective, especially in terms of formal, visual “literacy” and later semiotics and cultural theories, and the absence of viable alternatives, those criteria were assumed to be an appropriate basis for all visual art forms. But as these dominant criteria of art shifted alongside avant-garde art ideas, it became clear that some values and interests important to design and craft world purposes fit less and less well with those shifts in art world criteria.

Embedded in the body of visual art knowledge taught in art institutions, the dominant assumptions underlying understandings about art have obscured crucial distinctions, which design and craft worlds have a legitimate interest in making. But the criteria and defined bounds of art history tend to forestall the development of craft history and textiles history, diverting what specific textiles scholarship might be done into other disciplines (eg. anthropology and ethnography). Art world values and purposes have interfered with, and then denigrated, those of craft and design worlds, thus confusing students, limiting options, and undermining both quality and fruitful interactions in all three realms. Art programmes have tried to subsume contemporary visual arts practices under one illusory umbrella of assumed critical criteria and then criticised and ostracised amateur, craft and design expressions for not meeting these art world standards, neglecting to examine whether designers and craftspeople are even trying to fulfill the same ends. Is it appropriate to criticize someone as failing to achieve something they never set out to do? These art world attitudes, useful or otherwise, are rarely challenged by either carefully rigorous theoretical study or debate, or a strong opposition from minority positions. This is partly because there is no forum available in which to do so, and little willingness in the art world to seriously examine inconsistencies in those assumptions, or to debate with outsiders. It is also because there is little opportunity for others to develop the necessary research, ideas, and counter-arguments. The difficulties in bringing about the necessary changes in art education which might support textiles scholarship are further exacerbated by currently severe fiscal and political pressures and unsympathetic public attitudes towards visual arts education.

Another impediment to textiles scholarship, especially in MFA studies, arises from the art college’s traditional focus on the production of “finished objects” suitable for presentation in the gallery exhibition format. Entrenched in the programme requirements

and the experience of the faculty, this model constrains the acceptable form and content of textile studies. The typical products of textiles scholarship – samples, documentation, extensive research, written historical, analytical, or philosophical argumentation – do not fit this dominant model well. If faculty cannot guide or trust students outside the parameters of the typical focus on finished objects, students attempting a scholarship approach may not receive the degree of guidance which could render their studies more effective and their results more productive. Their ability to learn and to contribute is thereby compromised. As a result, many potentially fruitful approaches which could expand textiles studies into scholarship are curtailed, especially those which require the facilities available in making institutions for making samples.

Textiles scholarship is also deterred by the still prevalent attitude which privileges the artistic vision or idea as a pre-existing or separate entity to which medium is subordinate. In addition, the “post-modern critical stance” is the preferred perspective. Traditional or technical ideas, simple explorations to discover or understand textile qualities or meanings, are rarely deemed appropriate under these criteria. Clearly, ideas in and of the medium itself may be less perceptible or less interesting to a non-specialist audience. But they are not less intellectual or of lesser import because their purposes and fields of exploration differ from those of interest to the art world or a broad audience. As ideas relevant to the design and crafting of textiles, whether as subject matter for expression, as aesthetic or functional form, or as a path towards understanding the making and circulation of textiles in the world, they are an essential type of textile knowledge. The pursuit and worth of such ideas should not be dismissed by the art college system, if that is where textiles studies are pursued.

The dominant academic position of traditional art history, and its wide relevance, overshadows the legitimate and keenly-felt need for focussed textiles history. It is reasonable that students majoring in textiles should learn some of that history, if their studies are intended to give them a deeper understanding of textiles. Textiles history requires interpreting the relations among technical and materials history, the evolution and exchange of cultural and technical ideas, and features of economic and social import, in balance with those of the development of imagery, symbolic expression, meaning and patronage. Students also need ways to better understand the meaningful contexts of the foreign textiles which inspire them aesthetically and technically. It seems that only within such textiles scholarship can certain cultural meanings implicit in textile-making acts or knowledge emerge.

Unfortunately, the organization of NSCAD’s academic programmes around art history makes the provision of textile history, and non-Western material, difficult. Art historians still tend to dismiss the import of the above mentioned aspects, especially materials and technical contexts, as art history has not traditionally included those aspects. The art history department is unfairly expected to provide services they are unprepared for, because they have the requisite academic qualifications. And it is not clear that this should be the job of art history. Indeed, if the criteria determining the content of art history are not sensitive to what is important in textile history, including the possibility of meaning and symbolism deriving from making acts and usage, then art

history should not develop textile history. But if not within art history, then where? With no design or craft history programmes in Canada, the content and faculty specialties of available art history programmes severely constrain advanced study of textiles, decorative arts, or craft histories, and limit research of Canadian material. Those specialists are very rare. So, although textiles media have been taught at NSCAD since 1919, textiles history was introduced last year for the first time. Their continuation is uncertain, for it currently depends upon the specific qualifications and availability of the originating instructor as a parttime appointee.

Textiles studies in other fields, and symposia such as this one, clearly indicate the potential of textiles studies to reveal useful and interesting aspects of human experience. However, virtually all the advanced textiles-related studies carried on in Halifax goes on outside NSCAD, in universities with neither art nor textiles studies programmes, under the auspices of anthropology, women's studies, ethnography, etc. While this distribution of knowledge permits an invaluable range of useful perspectives and resources, it also prevents textiles scholarship from consolidating that knowledge coherently within a focal discipline with, by, and for the benefit of those students and scholars most clearly interested in it. Furthermore, this segregation of academic textile scholarship from textile-making students deprives them of a valuable role model, which might inspire or benefit their own scholarship interests.

Financial resources aside, textiles scholarship is also severely limited by the available literature and visual material. The literature available for textiles study is still considerably more sparse, and sometimes less scholarly, than comparable literature for art history, especially regarding contemporary textiles. Textile scholarship is needed to identify and fill the gaps, to expand the points of view available for discussion, and to describe and evaluate the range and variety of both historical and current textiles and practices. Visual resources require similar attention. In particular, textiles study is significantly tactile and structural. Neither of these aspects is adequately handled without a broad, well-documented study collection of actual textiles, accessible to all. Students gain much more from actual textiles examples than from slides. This is especially important to develop at NSCAD, as access to actual textile works in museums is rarely available. It is unfair to fill this need through instructors' collections, and the results of doing so will be uneven.

Despite the stress on the intellectual nature of visual art, NSCAD students and some instructors often resist academic approaches and standards, and their importance in making the fine arts degree a meaningful achievement and credential. But regarding academic approaches as unconnected or antithetical to studio-making experience prevents both from achieving the maximal benefit. Articulation and careful examination of criteria, visual effects, and ideas is not incompatible with the intuitive processes of artistry. Instructors must be able to articulate and lead productive discussions about what qualities to seek and value in objects, and why, and what kinds of processes and strategies to practice or attend to during or after the making process. Good scholarship is needed to develop fine but crucial distinctions, clarifying issues of language and interpretation important in understanding the communication interaction at the heart of

both visual and educational practice. Some of that scholarship exists in the field of art education.

The literature of art education examines many questions confronting post-secondary art instructors, not only about teaching and learning, but also about aesthetic sensitivities and the nature of visual arts. Art educators propose theoretical foundations to assist in developing effective studio programmes and seek to understand the processes underlying learning, creating and interpreting material artifacts. Unfortunately, these resources of art education are rarely sought out. Often the very teachers most interested in educating students to professional art practice are themselves not well-educated in the profession they practice – education. An exhibition record is a primary criterion for art college faculty, perpetuating the idea that art teachers are hired as artists, not teachers. Not only is an exhibition record not related to teaching ability, it is biased against some scholarly approaches to textile making, to which exhibiting may not be relevant. This prejudice against education studies is also reflected in the limited and random art education training and unguided experience required at the MFA level, despite the fact that this is a terminal degree for teaching. Several unexamined assumptions about post-secondary teaching underly this situation. One is that the main role of instructors is to spot and cultivate talent. Another is that observation or practice alone will educate students adequately, in art-making and in teaching. Another is that art education studies have nothing to offer to the teaching of art. These assumptions ignore that teaching is a specific practice with its own useful and necessary content which deserves equal consideration alongside clearly understanding the content being taught. Effective teaching depends on understanding interactive communication – both verbal and demonstrative – and interpretive processes, as well as the many ways by which learning can and does occur. Carefully directed and sensitive orchestration is needed to evaluate and cultivate students' talents, abilities, and understanding in the desired directions. Teaching effectiveness cannot be preprogrammed, but it can be assisted through better provision of teaching and evaluation skills, curricular planning and administrative issues, with regular guidance, discussion and feedback to and among MFA students about their teaching, learning and making experiences.

Communication is also a vital aspect of making and interpreting textiles. Communication and interpretation both revolve around meaning. Art college instructors try to guide students towards effective matching of ideas with medium, to convey or evoke meanings. It follows, then, that understanding how things mean is important to the understanding of material artifacts. What is often overlooked, however, is that meaning also emerges from participatory experience with objects, beyond contemplation. Material culture studies of textiles reveal that their meaningfulness often depends as much or more from their contexts of making and use as from any symbolic representations. Indeed, the power of a symbol to mean anything frequently arises from the use or role of what is signified, and ensuing use of the symbol. From this perspective, traditional purposes, the urge to make by hand, and the satisfactions derived by amateurs from tackling the challenges of textile making, are also vitally relevant to understanding the meaningfulness of textiles and are worthy of scholarship, in addition to the resulting objects.

Many art college instructors do operate with broad conceptions of art, able to accommodate a range of textile work. The current vagueness of conceptions of art can be helpful as much as detrimental. But this vagueness also masks crucial disjunctions and omissions. Not all artifacts are art in the contemporary art world sense, not do they seek to be. Nevertheless, textiles and crafting scholars must confront the wide-spread, institutionalized attitudes about art – and non-art – as well as their own, if they are to attain the desired progress, respect, support and on-going vitality of both textiles scholarship and making practices. In addition to the passion, commitment, evangelizing and careful scholarship described and demonstrated by others here, this confrontation requires thorough, rigorous, philosophical development of the necessary concepts and positions, encompassing and expanding relative to, and often from within, the art world.

If the study of material objects is important because they are products of purposeful human acts, and thereby carry meaning, then perhaps meaning and how it is generated and affected by human acts is an important bridge linking media and different worlds, which textiles and art education scholarship can help build. For Canadian liberal arts programmes, this expansive humanities approach seems richer and more generally valuable than a primarily professional or vocational model.