



From the Bauhaus to the Venice Biennale: How textiles became art

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Anni Albers, Sheila Hicks, and Pacita Abad have revolutionized yarns



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Anni Albers might be remembered as one of textile art's greatest 20th-century practitioners, but she was slow to warm to the medium. When offered a place in a weaving workshop at the Bauhaus school in 1922, she recalled thinking it – in words that summed up the attitude of the moment – ‘rather sissy.’ She had hoped to study painting or stained glass, but those classes weren't open to women. Later in her career, she reflected that, ‘Galleries and museums didn't show textiles, that was always considered craft and not art.’

Nearly a century has passed since Albers first began turning threads into art, and the tide is finally turning. Increasingly, older generations of textile or fiber artists are getting the recognition they deserve, with their ancient, if long-sidelined, medium finding fresh relevance in our politically fraught, globalized moment. Major museums are staging surveys of both established and newly discovered figures whose work is rooted in artisanal techniques. Fiber's many overlooked devotees, often female and working beyond traditional centers for art in the West, have been a focus at biennials and art fairs keen to redress the gender and colonialist prejudices of art history. Meanwhile, in a world dominated by life online, textiles' emphasis on the handworked, and the sincerity and emotion that labor-intensive craft implies, offers an alternative that's both comforting and fresh.

For Albers, whose abstract geometric wall hangings were the subject of a lauded Tate Modern retrospective in 2018, this tactility was key. She identified what have become cornerstones for many artists using fiber, including its essential tie to human life and the innovations of Indigenous peoples. As a teacher, to get her students thinking about textiles' unique place at the heart of our engagement with the world, she would tell them to begin from zero and imagine themselves in a desert without clothes. For millennia, it has been essential for humankind's survival that we nurture and harvest fibers, be it cotton from the land, wool from sheep, or silk gleaned from larvae. Textiles follow us from the cradle to the grave – the baby shawl to the shroud.

It was photographs of thorn-stitched Peruvian mummy bundles, offset by Machu Picchu's awesome ruins and the towering Andes, that first suggested textiles' potency to **Sheila Hicks**, a student from the Yale School of Art, whom Albers met when her husband Josef, was the school's chair. Now in her eighties, Hicks is a luminary of the fiber-art generation that emerged in the 1960s, whose numerous recent shows include a retrospective at the Pompidou Center in 2018 and a monumental installation at the 2017 Venice Biennale. Like Albers, Hicks was fuelled by Bauhaus notions of blurred boundaries between art and craft, and would go on to learn from the textile cultures of Central and South America, as well as India, the Middle East, and Africa. Her vivaciously experimental sculptural works include yarns that cascade down walls and from ceilings like twisting vines, lava, or poured paint, or are wound into boulders in hot tangerines, raspberry pinks and mango yellows: the brilliant synthetic colors of the industrial age.



Magdalena Abakanowicz at Galeria Starmach, Art Basel in Basel 2019

Combining the conceptual innovations of abstract art with those of ancient traditions from across the world, Hicks's sculpture also anticipates today's focus on globalization, offering a model of respectful creative empathy with multiple cultures at a time when the global project is under threat. When fiber art began to make an impact in the 1960s, however, it was couched in defiantly feminist terms, with the emphasis on artists' radical evolution of what had been seen as enfeebling women's work. Recent 21st-century exhibitions, such as curator Cosmin Costinas's 'A beast, a god, and a line' at Para Site in Hong Kong in 2018, have expanded the focus, looking at what the marginalization of a medium frequently central to Indigenous non-Western cultures reveals about the hangover of a colonialist mentality, too.

Among the most astonishing discoveries of recent years is the late Indian artist Mrinalini Mukherjee's sculpture, which has only recently begun to garner international appreciation, thanks partly to an acclaimed survey at the Met Breuer in 2019. From the 1970s to the 2000s, Mukherjee conjured outlandish and frequently erotic biomorphic forms, channeling modern sculpture, female genitalia, ancient statuary, and riotous plant life using knotted hemp rope.

Be it farmed or gleaned, fiber underscores our connection to one of today's most pressing issues: the embattled natural world. This thread is clearly visible in Mukherjee's libidinal vegetal forms, or the legendary Polish sculptor **Magdalena Abakanowicz's** huge, earthy abstractions, often made with old ship rope, which are to be the subject of a major Tate Modern survey this year. Yet while they speak of primordial life, fibers are a medium peculiarly relevant to the hyper-industrialized modern age, too. As the principal building block of the fashion industry, textiles speak of radical shifts in consumer culture and identity, new modes of production and trade. This is something the 90-year-old, Romanian-born artist Marion Baruch, who is based not far from Milan, has touched on in her latest works. Following a partial loss of sight, she has turned to using prêt-à-porter garment offcuts: monochrome fabrics full of clothes-pattern holes. These become elegant sculptures that are simply draped from ceilings and on walls, outlining negative space. Inky and spectral like forlorn ghosts, they're also harbingers of waste and the exhaustion of resources, for which the fashion industry is notorious.



Pacita Abad at Silverlens, Art Basel Hong Kong 2019

Another artist who uses textile traditions to shine a light on the overlooked, and who is currently benefiting from a timely reappraisal, is the late Pacita Abad. Her quilted and padded *trapunto* canvases (from the Italian word for quilting), which are screen-printed, embroidered, and embellished in dazzling shades, draw on everything from clothing to puppetry, which she discovered throughout a peripatetic life. She drew influences from Papua New Guinea, Sudan, Thailand, and Bangladesh, as well as the psychedelic aesthetic and left-wing thinking of the San Francisco hippie scene that she encountered when she first arrived in the United States from the Philippines in 1970. Like Hicks, Abad had a global perspective that anticipated multiculturalism. While her work is often abstract, she also brought the political potential of textiles to the fore. As with the work of one of art's most impassioned, long-standing champions of women's rights, Faith Ringgold, whose now widely celebrated quilts explore African-American life, Abad's figurative series *Immigrant Experience* channels the untold narratives of people of color in America. Begun in the early 1980s, it includes stories of border incarceration, the sex trade, classrooms, street signage, and cityscapes lit up by clothing brands, as related to her by fellow immigrants.

'Life today is very bewildering,' wrote Albers in 1938. 'We must come down to earth from the clouds where we live in vagueness and experience the most real thing there is: material.' As fiber art's resurgence continues apace, it seems her words have never been more relevant.

Top image: Pacita Abad at Silverlens

