

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Textile Society of America Symposium
Proceedings

Textile Society of America

2004

California and the Fiber Art Revolution

Suzanne Baizerman

Oakland Museum of California, sbaizer@museumca.org

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf>

 Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#)

Baizerman, Suzanne, "California and the Fiber Art Revolution" (2004). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 449.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/449>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

California and the Fiber Art Revolution

Suzanne Baizerman

Imogene Gieling Curator of Crafts and Decorative Arts

Oakland Museum of California

Oakland, CA

510-238-3005

sbaizer@museumca.org

In the 1960s and '70s, California artists participated in and influenced an international revolution in fiber art. The *California Design (CD)* exhibitions, a series held at the Pasadena Art Museum from 1955 to 1971 (and at another venue in 1976) captured the form and spirit of the transition from handwoven, designer textiles to two dimensional fiber art and sculpture.¹

Initially, the *California Design* exhibits brought together manufactured and one-of-a-kind hand-crafted objects, akin to the Good Design exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. The last five exhibitions —*California Design 8* through the twelfth exhibition, *California Design '76*— were organized Eudorah Moore, later craft coordinator at the National Endowment for the Arts. When Moore took over, she instituted juried exhibitions; entries were invited from throughout the state and full-color catalogs were published. These exhibitions were covered in newspapers and magazines nationwide. These last five exhibitions, in 1962, '65, '68, '71, and '76 (*California Design 8, 9, 10, 11, and '76*) are the focus here. While these exhibits by no means represent all of the prominent fiber artists of the 1960s and '70s, they do represent work being done during the period. The *CD* catalogs document experimental work in fiber, especially works from the San Francisco Bay Area, primarily Berkeley, and from Southern California.

Touring *California Design 11* (1971), a visitor might have been startled to encounter *Arizona Inner Space*, by Barbara Shawcroft, a work that is in marked contrast to works exhibited in earlier *California Design* exhibitions that featured primarily flat woven cloth (fig. 1). Shawcroft's imposing piece, coarsely textured, and three-dimensional, was made of a single strand of bulky yarn, worked improvisationally in a knotless netting technique. The dark, nestlike form suggested a place of solace and comfort. *Arizona Inner Space* was destined from its inception to be a work of art rather than a functional object. Emphasis was placed on process: each step derived from the one before. The work could be amended to create additional spaces and connections at its maker's discretion.

What accounts for the intense development of fiber art— represented by Shawcroft's piece—in California? During and after World War II, California was a magnet for job-seeking Americans of different backgrounds. It was a state without the more historically based, entrenched traditions of the East Coast. Plus, it bordered on Latin America and faced the Pacific Rim. This independence and diversity bred a certain kind of open-mindedness and led California to influence the lifestyles of other Americans, especially in architecture and design. By the 1960s, the civil rights movement, the anti-war

¹ This paper is based on the author's work on the topic of fiber art and the *California Design* exhibitions, which will be published by Chronicle Books, San Francisco in 2005.

movement and women's movements had changed the social and political climate of California. For fiber art, the women's movement was especially important because of the traditional association of women with textiles in the domestic sphere. (Men were part of the fiber revolution, but they were a minority.) Anti-establishment sentiments and anti-materialist non-conformity could be seen on the streets where young people talked about "sex, drugs and rock and roll" and "doing their own thing."

Fiber art was also affected by dramatic changes that occurred in the 1950s when a potter, Peter Voulkos, questioned the limitations imposed upon craft media. He and his students explored clay as a sculptural medium and gained worldwide attention for their gestural, expressive, large scale clay work. As part of a craft community, those working with fiber were aware of his iconoclastic ideas and began to question self-imposed limits.

In 1959, Voulkos was urged to take a position at the University of California Berkeley by Ed Rossbach, head of the department's fiber program. Rossbach shared Voulkos' open-minded attitude towards the limitless potential of craft media. Rossbach began teaching there in the 1950s. He brought with him a visionary approach to experimenting with fiber (on and off the loom) and a keen interest in ethnic textiles and their diverse structures.

There were other influential programs. At the California College of Arts and Crafts, German-born Trude Guermonprez applied her Bauhaus training to her weaving classes. The free, experimental spirit of Katherine Westphal, Ed Rossbach's wife, energized students at University of California, Davis. Bernard Kester and James Bassler at the University of California, at Los Angeles, and Mary Jane Leland at Long Beach State College (now the California State University Long Beach) inspired students in the southern part of the state.² Critical to the development of fiber art was the fact that all of these educators had studied art and trained their students to see themselves as artists working in fiber.

In the context of change in contemporary society and educational expansion in the fiber arts, the *California Design* exhibits provided a much-needed exhibition venue for the work of fiber artists and stimulated interest in the fiber crafts. The earliest change observable in fiber art in the series was the transition from the display of functional textiles to the display of wall hangings. The first eight *CD* exhibitions (1954–1962) presented—almost exclusively—works crafted for interior-design needs, such as handwoven or printed fabric for upholstery fabric, casement cloth, room dividers, woven blinds, rugs, and placemats.³

The catalog for the eighth *California Design* exhibition in 1962 continued to showcase primarily textiles for interior design applications, including hand-loomed yardage by

²The California College of Arts and Crafts was renamed the California College of the Arts in 2003.

Long Beach State College is now California State University, Long Beach.

³ Clifford Nelson, director of the early *CD* exhibitions, worked closely with the Southern California Handweavers' Guild for works selected for the exhibitions. Members of the guild made nearly all of the textiles in *CD 1* (1955) through *CD 7* (1961). The jury system of selection was instituted for *CD 8*. The connection to the Southern California Handweavers' Guild was made by Glenn Adamson, "Crafting an Identity: 21 Years of California Design." Lecture at symposium, Revisiting 'California Design' Exhibitions: 1952–1976, Oakland Museum of California, May 8, 1999.

individuals or firms, such as Maria Kipp and Webb Textiles. A dramatic photograph from the *CD 9* catalog shows Robert Webb's fabric, aptly named *Red Rock Canyon* (fig. 2). (The photography of objects in beautiful California scenery was a hallmark of the *California Design* catalogs).



Figure 1 (left). Barbara Shawcroft, *environmental structure*, Arizona Inner Space. Knotless netting, jute; 17 x 6 feet; 1971 (California Design 11). Photo: Richard Gross.

Figure 2 (right). Robert Webb, designer, fabric, *Red Rock Canyon and Old Gold*. Handwoven by Webb Textiles, M.E. Cranston, Tapestry, Landscape, 4 x 6 feet; 1965. (California Design 9). Photo: Richard Gross.

In both *CD 8* and *CD 9* there were flat-weave rugs and thick-pile rya rugs showing the influence of modernist and Scandinavian design traditions. Also in *CD 9* was Gere Kavanaugh's flowered rug in vivid psychedelic colors. These and other works showed a bold use of intense color, bearing the influence of renowned California fabric designer Dorothy Liebes, whose pulsing combinations, such as blue with green and fuchsia with orange, were readily adopted by California designers and had a strong impact upon fabrics nationwide.

As early as 1961, one-of-a-kind works—a wall hanging and a few tapestries—began to appear in the *CD* exhibitions and more appeared in *CD 8* and *CD 9*. The fiber wall art in these early exhibitions reflected modernist design influences of both the Bauhaus and Scandinavia. 33] On a larger scale was a tapestry designed by Mark Adams, *Great Wing*, woven in the modern European tapestry tradition at Aubusson, the renowned French weaving center. Ragnild Langlet, born and trained in Sweden, exhibited the elegant monochromatic hanging *Trees*.

In contrast to these more or less representational works, Lillian Elliott's *Autumn* in *CD 8* (1962) was an abstract fabric collage composed of a variety of patterns and textures. Casual treatment of the fabric's raveled edges gave the piece an air of spontaneity. The work's originality anticipated the leading role Elliott would play in fiber art by experimenting with two- and three-dimensional forms of yarn, paper, gut and basketry materials.

In 1962, the same year as *CD 8*, a key fiber art event occurred at the international level. It was the first Lausanne Biennale, in Switzerland, a juried show organized to celebrate the revival of tapestry. The presence in this exhibition of innovative artists, such as Magdalena Abakanowicz of Poland, who used powerful, rough-textured, curved forms related to the human body, was indicative of a dramatic move away from traditional, smooth-surfaced, rectangular tapestries. The 1962 biennial did not include California artists, but future biennials did. The quality of the Lausanne exhibitions, as well as the publicity they generated, elevated fiber art to a new level of importance. Another key event of 1962 was the solo exhibition in a Staten Island, New York art gallery of the abstract work of New York artist Lenore Tawney, the first fiber artist who was part of New York's mainstream art scene, which accepted her works as fine art.

In *CD 9* (1965) the number of wall hangings increased. Two-dimensional woven hangings were loosely worked with abstract designs and were more frankly experimental than the hangings in previous exhibitions. Even more noteworthy was the appearance of three-dimensional pieces alongside two-dimensional works, such as Trude Guermonprez' widely imitated "space hanging" *Banner* created on the loom in double weave (fig. 3).



*Fig. 3. Trude Guermonprez (third from right), space hanging, Banner, 28 x 8 x 7 inches
Other artists shown: Eleanor M. Kass, John Charles Gordon, Mary Balzer Buskirk, Hal Painter, Janet Van
Evera, M.E. Cranston-Bennett 1965 (California Design 9). Photo: Richard Gross.*

New materials appeared in the tenth exhibition in (1968), as did work in larger scale, for example, John Charles six foot tall hanging in hemp, raffia, and wool. A wall hanging by Barbara Waszak, "Del Norte" combined weaving with beads, leather, wool, old hardware, a mixed media celebration of excess that was not atypical during this period.

The influence of ethnic textiles became apparent in *CD 10*. In part because of increased interest in international travel, artists working in fiber had begun to mine ethnographic and archaeological textiles for their unique structures, techniques, color combinations, and symbolic or ceremonial content.

For example, pre-Columbian Peruvian weavers were expert dyers and colorists who used extraordinarily complex textile techniques. Various Indonesian peoples created complex patterning by employing ikat dyeing technique, which involved tying and then

dyeing small sections of warp or weft yarn.⁴ Fiber artists, many of them college educated, conducted in-depth research to learn more about ethnic textiles and traveled abroad to study textiles and, when possible, work alongside those who made them. Artists and researchers from abroad shared their knowledge with American artists. Yoshiko Wada, who came to the United States from Japan to study, disseminated information about Japan's *shibori*-dyed textiles. Californians' proximity to Latin America and the Pacific Rim made them particularly responsive to the aesthetic potential of the textiles indigenous to these cultures.

CD 10 included examples of batik and *plangi*, dyeing techniques found in Indonesia, for instance, were seen in Carol Ryoko Funai's wall hanging. Katherine Westphal exhibited *Two Monkeys*. In her exploration of Scandinavian techniques, Carol Beadle reinterpreted Scandinavian design. Work in three dimensions continued, shown in this dizzying shot of work by Mary Buskirk, Hideko Nishimura and John Charles Weirauch (fig. 4).



Figure 4 (Left to right). Mary Balzer Buskirk, *Space Hanging*; Hideko Nishimura, *tubular double cloth woven form*; John Charles Weirauch, *knitted structure*; 1968 (California Design 10).
Photo: Richard Gross.

Another dimensional piece by Ed Rossbach was exhibited in *CD 10*. Capitalizing on the UC Berkeley Design Department textile collection, Ed Rossbach explored various Euro-American and ethnic textile techniques using contemporary materials—especially such humble items as plastic tubing and newspaper—in eloquent and innovative ways. Basketry was a special interest. Rossbach's sole work in the *California Design* exhibitions was this dimensional piece in *CD 10*, *Palm Basket*, made of plastic and *ixtle* (a plant fiber) woven around the splines of a palm leaf (fig. 5).

CD 11 (1971) was a banner year for fiber in the California Design exhibitions. Several important exhibitions contributed to the changes. Four years earlier, the 1967 *Lausanne*

⁴ Examples of earlier use of ethnic weaving techniques appeared in Mary Meigs Atwater, *Byways in Hand-Weaving*, New York: Macmillan, 1954, and Harriet Tidball, *Peruvian Textiles, Unlimited, Parts 1 and 2*, Shuttle Craft Guild Monographs No. 25 and 26, Lansing, MI: Shuttle Craft Guild, 1968 and 1969. In Else Regensteiner's book, *The Art of Weaving* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1970), ethnic weaves were included as examples of textile art.

Biennale had included three-dimensional work as well as traditional tapestry. Americans interested in fiber took notice of this catalytic Lausanne exhibition. In 1969, the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, mounted *Wall Hangings*, a show signaling an increasing acceptance of fiber art as a mainstream art form. (The work of California artist Kay Sekimachi appeared in this MOMA exhibition.) The same year as *CD 11, Deliberate Entanglements*, exhibited influential European fiber artists such as Magdalena Abakanowicz and Francoise Grossen, as well as prominent the American artists Sheila Hicks and Claire Zeisler. The Pasadena Art Museum installed a solo exhibition of the work of Magdalena Abakanowicz. These exhibitions, and the week-long conference that accompanied them, together with *CD 11*, added to California's presence in the international fiber art movement.

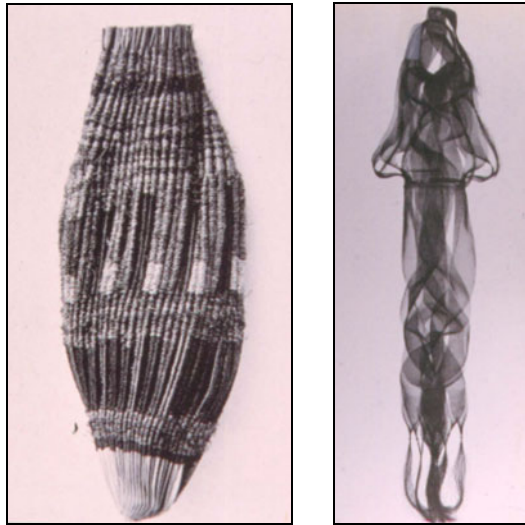


Figure 5 (left). Ed Rossbach, Palm Basket, palm ixtle and plastic raffia; 1968 (California Design 10). Photo: Craft Horizons.

Figure 6 (right). Kay Sekimachi, three-dimensional weaving, Nagare VI. Nylon monofilament, 82 x 13 x 11 inches; 1970 (California Design 11). Photo: Richard Gross.

CD 11 was notable for the number of dimensional works exhibited, including Barbara Shawcroft's sculpted environment, noted earlier. In sharp contrast was Gerhardt Knodel's more formal environment, designed to create a formal, defined dining area.

In this era, the celebration of the natural environment could be seen in pieces like Joan Austin's. She used double-weave and other techniques to create a wall relief that suggested organic forms such as moss, roots, and bark.

In *CD 11*, traditional techniques were used in new ways and on a large scale. Ted Hallman knitted a nine-foot-tall hanging sculpture, *Alby's Tree*. Neda Al Hilali's mobile "Ship of Fools," used macramé, forever reclaiming the technique from the ubiquitous knotted plant hangar. Gyongy Laky, a student of Ed Rossbach's, exhibited a large basket composed of yarn-wrapped tubes. Dyed textiles in *CD 11* reached psychedelic proportions, echoing the tie-dyed T-shirts of the counterculture, as in Marian Clayden's *Cool It*. (Clayden's fabrics were used in the New York production of the musical *Hair* in 1968.)

Expressive content also expanded in this exhibition. In her humorous commentary on consumer culture, *Computerized Matchmaker*, Ida Horowitz fashioned a machine—a pieced, stuffed, soft sculpture). Eligible singles—embraced in sheltering arms—were fed into a machine that processed them into raw data.

Ethnic textiles in continued to inspire fiber artists, among them James Bassler whose wall hanging, shown in detail was reminiscent of ancient Peruvian textiles. Marianne Childress's *Kiva Ladder*, constructed on a sapling scaffold, evoked the Pueblo Indian ceremonial chamber. Experimentation was also occurring in surface design. An asymmetrical, two-dimensional, hand-screened textile, *Beast in the Jungle* by Frances Butler featured an enigmatic juxtaposition of tigers, a reclining female figure, and a high rise building.

In 1972, the year after *CD 11*, the highly influential book, *Beyond Craft: The Art Fabric*, was published, bringing together groundbreaking work in international textiles. The book was co-authored by fabric designer and collector Jack Lenor Larsen and Mildred Constantine, former curator at New York's Museum of Modern Art. Five California artists were selected for inclusion; two of them were Ed Rossbach and Kay Sekimachi. Rossbach's *Palm Basket*, exhibited in *CD 10*, was one of several examples of his work in the book. Representing Kay Sekimachi was one of her signature multiple-layer weavings. Sekimachi, a student of Trude Guermonprez, had expanded the technique of double weave to multiple layers to serve her aesthetic needs. Using the challenging material of dyed nylon monofilament, she created a gossamer hanging of eloquent beauty (fig. 6). A piece similar to those in *Beyond Craft*, *Nagare VI*, appeared in *CD 11*. Sekimachi's monofilament work was also selected for the 1969 *Wall Hangings* exhibition and the 1973 Lausanne Biennale.

In 1975, the magazine *Fiberarts* was launched in North Carolina and quickly contributed to the growth of fiber art in the United States. The magazine disseminated information and observations about artists and exhibitions around the world. Initially a newsletter with black-and-white photographs, it soon became a four-color magazine. It continues to be published today.

Five years elapsed between *CD 11* (1971) and *CD '76*, planned in conjunction with the U.S. bicentennial. In the intervening years, two new educational institutions opened in Berkeley, in part a response to cutbacks in the design department at U. C. Berkeley and also in recognition of the increased interest in fiber art. The Pacific Basin Textile Art Center was established in 1972 by Inger Jensen and Pat McGraw and Fiberworks was started by former Ed Rossbach students, Gyongy Laky, and other artists in 1973. Students came from across the country to take their classes and expose themselves to the abundance of talent in the Bay Area. Both institutions maintained galleries that displayed contemporary work as well as ethnic textiles, adding to the Bay Area's fiber rich environment.

CD '76 reflected the maturing of fiber art in the mastery of technique, design, and concept visible in the exhibited works, and the artists' level of professionalism and sophistication. Lia Cook trained as a painter before she studied with Ed Rossbach. *CD '76* was her only association with the exhibition series. However, she exhibited in the 1975 and 1977 Lausanne biennals. In her *CD '76* piece, *Interweave II*, Cook used both

ikat-dyeing techniques and photographic processes. She produced bold, close-up images, a commentary on textile and image. Another work by Marian Clayden played with a key characteristic of yarn—its tendency to twist.

The influence of pioneering European fiber artists was apparent in Irina Averkieff's tapestry in her choice of materials (dyed sisal and jute), her vibrant colors, and the scale of her work. The work was cleverly shaped from individually woven, ruffled segments attached to a base. Each individual segment was worked with a gradation of the color red for a rich and sensual effect (fig. 7).



Figure 7. Irina Averkieff, wall hanging, tapestry woven and dyed fiber, sisal and jute, 5 x 6 feet; 1976 (California Design '76). Photo: Richard Gross.

For *November Wall*, of wool and sisal, Tom Fender created large-diameter weft, wrapped weft yarns, working large, free hanging loops into the fabric as he wove. The resulting artwork presented a contrast of order and disorder. Its size and presence is reminiscent of the work of Eva Hesse. Ferne Jacob was influenced by Lenore Tawney. In Jacobs' untitled container form, basketry techniques were used to create a minimalist work that was spare, stately and elegant.

Among the works in *CD 76, Chandra*, an environment by Mary Chesterfield, stands apart as the largest fiber structure shown in any *CD* exhibition. It was composed of great quantities of sisal yarn, suspended, sprayed with silver paint, and left to hang like a massive fringe. The structure's interior was lit with pink neon tubes, to evoke *Chandra*, a word meaning the glow of moonlight in Sanskrit, from which the title was derived. Fiber was being pushed to the limit.

An important addition to *CD '76* was the Body Covering section. The section included jewelry and wearable art, much of it highly individual and expressive—even outlandish (fig. 8). The works reflected, in part, the styles of the street — like the imaginatively dressed flower children and hippies. Nicki Marx's *Shaman's Robe*, larger than life size, was more costume than clothing. In subsequent years, wearable art would become a more visible and an important part of the fiber movement.



Figure 8. Nicki Marx, *cape, Shaman's Robe*, feathers, horsehair, leather, 80 x 34 x 4 inches; 1976 (California Design '76). Photo: Richard Gross.

California Design '76 was the last of the *California Design* exhibitions. In its twenty-two year run of twelve exhibitions, *California Design* made the state and the nation aware of the creative force of California, giving a legitimacy and a push to art in craft media and to fiber art in particular. Many of the artists whose work appeared in the series have disappeared from the scene, but many continued on, to make fiber art what it is today: a viable art medium, exhibited in galleries and museums, supported by collectors, most visibly the Friends of Fiber Art. And more encouragingly, students continue to explore the physical and metaphoric potential of thread in even more expressive and conceptual ways.