

## Preface

Why I wrote this book

A decade ago, I came upon a feature entitled “Air Conditioned Clothes” in a widely-distributed Sunday newspaper supplement aimed at teenagers. Models wearing crudely-cut, frayed garments were shown under a headline stating, “turn stuff you’ve got into trendy... summer styles.” Girls were told to cut out most of a T-shirt to transform it into a “hipster halter,” and to “slice and ice” a pair of jeans by removing the waistband and dipping the frayed top into undiluted bleach. Boys were advised to cut off the sleeves and tails of a shirt and the bottom of a pair of pants.<sup>1</sup>

When I asked students in a fashion history class what they could learn about contemporary clothing norms from this feature, they thought about gender roles, silhouettes, seasonal styles, and individuality. What remained invisible to them, however, was how cheap and expendable cloth must be in a society where young people are casually instructed to bleach and cut up their garments and throw away the parts they aren’t interested in. Even when I pointed out how they take cloth for granted, most students remained unimpressed. It wasn’t until we had studied the high value that fabric held in previous eras—the fact that clothing was passed on in wills, for example, or used in political power plays between rival kings—that the point began to hit home.

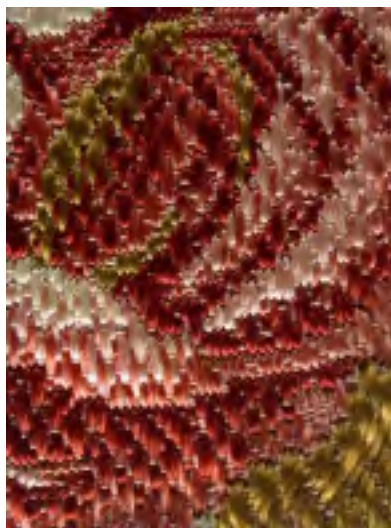
Living as we do in a post-industrialized world, fabric has become ubiquitous and inexpensive. Most of us are very distant from its production, and the magic of cloth-making has thus for the most part become invisible; few who have not witnessed the laborious processes and multiple steps that go into making even the simplest cloth realize what treasures they may be wearing or holding in their hands. Furthermore, while textile-making formerly took place both in (often prestigious) workshop or commercial contexts and within the home, the visibility of the former decreased considerably after the Industrial Revolution. Textiles became, at least in the Western mind, increasingly seen as something domestic and feminine, and textile-making as a primarily frivolous pastime done by women who were confined to the home. It was either identified as women’s work, or, especially in the 20th century, as a kind of “non-work;” an old-fashioned activity that we might grow out of or leave behind when we move on to “real” work such as medicine or the law. Another way of understanding this is to say that when we no longer have to make textiles because they are manufactured for us in faraway factories, textile-making takes on something of a hobby status. The varied historical meanings and significance of textiles faded from view, and they were generally left out of the broader historical narrative. By the modern age, they were treated in the West as part of the “background”—the realm of daily, repetitive and cyclical work that was, at least until quite recently, not taken very seriously. Schoolchildren were not taught about cloth, but about the great deeds of the “foreground”—the battles, political activities and alliances—that were usually conducted by men. (Ironically, textiles were a part of that foreground arena too, but those stories were underplayed or even forgotten.)<sup>2</sup>

I do not mean to underestimate the importance of textile-making as a hobby. There are millions of people who choose to sew, knit, quilt, and otherwise work with cloth today, and I know they may well be among the most enthusiastic readers of this book. Most of them take up these activities because they are creative pastimes that provide a sense of aesthetic satisfaction and perhaps a link with others in their community. However, even the most avid craftspeople of today typically think of textiles primarily in terms of their expressive function or their possibilities of income generation. Few of them know about the roles cloth plays worldwide in myth or symbolic ritual, or the way it has been used to further political and social power. Few think about all the ways in which textiles impact their own daily lives. In sum, most people are unaware of the wide reach of this subject because they have never had the opportunity to think about the topic holistically. They do not realize the rich and textured stories cloth can tell. I am writing this book because I want others to see why this subject really *does* matter. My intention is to shine new light on the taken-for-granted but fascinating subject of the roles and meanings that textiles hold in cultures throughout the world. I hope to make it undeniably evident that to be human is to be involved with cloth.

I come to this topic with far more than intellectual or academic interest. While I explore a wealth of ideas in the book and synthesize information from many disciplines and literatures, my relationship with textiles also extends deeply into emotional, physical, and spiritual realms. I hope to communicate about these dimensions as well. Some of my fondest childhood memories relate to the sensual pleasures of cloth. I spent many hours making clothes for my dolls out of the neckerchiefs that were fairly ubiquitous in the 1950s. These small silk squares came in a wide variety of color and patterns. They weren’t expensive—I think we got them at Woolworth’s—but they were wonderful to handle. They felt soft and smooth, and draped beautifully. I enjoyed folding and pleating the silk and tying it around the figures. I wasn’t really concerned with style; this was simply cloth play. I also have a poignant memory of the first time I was allowed to go clothes shopping on my own, when I came home with a sensuous red velvet dress. Again I remember the fabric rather than the shape of the garment—I can still see its saturated hue, the way the nap rippled when it was touched, and the way it caught the light. Also imprinted in my memory are visits to the American Museum of Natural History in New York, where I saw African and Native American artifacts made from raffia and other texturally exciting fibers. They made such a strong impression that even as I write about them now, I can almost feel the material between my fingers.



Paris Bordone, Portrait of a Woman from the Fugger Family, oil on canvas, c. 1540.



{above, left} *Magnified view of a woven silk apparel fragment from Italy, 1735-39.*

{above, right} *Beverly Gordon spinning at Hancock Shaker Village, Pittsfield, Massachusetts, c. 1974.*



I have strong body memories too from the later years when I began to create textiles—the meditative feeling of moving back and forth at the “great” or “walking” wheel, **spinning** wool, or the sensation in my back when sitting at the loom, pushing my feet on the pedals and bending over the yarns. My hands remember the smooth patina of the equipment I was working on. I can easily call up the smells of wet wool, fresh silk, fermenting indigo, or flowers cooking on the stove to yield a yellow dye, and the physical pleasure of winding a beautifully sequenced warp. That was both a visual and tactile experience. I loved watching the colors emerge, as well as the sensation of literally bouncing my fingers on the threads as they grew taut. Kinetic memories also come from the intimate encounters I have had with the textiles I have studied over the years: pushing down the resilient fibers of an Oriental pile carpet or the bumpy **beads** of a heavily dimensioned Iroquois pincushion or Yoruba scabbard, dealing with the sensual overload of a Victorian crazy **quilt** or a **Baroque tapestry**. I have been entranced by close-up views of finely-worked textiles that bear witness to patient workmanship and skillful play with color.

Emotional and spiritual associations are equally salient. I learned to weave in high school from a Dutch woman I admired deeply who had been in the Resistance movement during World War II. She was gentle and modest, a quiet heroine who was appreciative and conversant with a world of art and beauty. She opened me up to the joy of thread and pattern and the sheer enchantment of seeing cloth come to life, and I still associate that magic with the goodness she embodied. Years later, when I returned to weaving, I was living in a communal household. I traveled to a local “Y” to take classes, but was saving money for a loom of my own. I set up a box labeled “Loom Fund” in the living room, and my housemates frequently dropped in small donations. I treasured the “investment” they made in me, and when I had finally amassed enough to make that all-important purchase, I felt their support like an invisible hand behind my back.

Weaving was intimately associated with a network of generous friends.

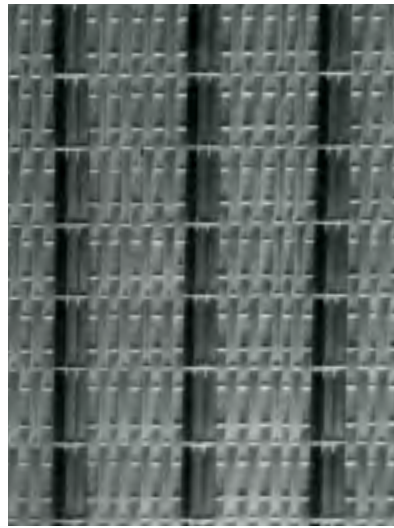
Soon after, I was given the opportunity of teaching and demonstrating weaving at historic Shaker sites near Pittsfield, Massachusetts. I loved working with the old equipment. All of it was plain and sturdy, but graceful, and everything was made to fit just perfectly with the body and the hand. I felt the energy of the people who had used those tools in that very space, and learned a great deal from them. It was inevitable that in a Shaker setting, where I would frequently repeat Mother Ann’s adage, “Put your hands to work and your hearts to God,” that Shaker philosophy would become part of my own work. I took on their the Shakers’ high standards, hearing their the Shakers’ admonitions to make sure that everything was done well, or right—if there was an error in the weaving, it had to be taken out and started again. As I learned more about the work they had done, I became more patient, more willing to work precisely and at a leisurely pace, and more able to move into a reverent state. When at one point I set about reproducing a sample of “poplar cloth,” a unique **Shaker** fabric primarily used to cover small sewing boxes, I experienced a particularly deep sense of connection. This cloth was made with thin strips of shaved poplar wood (logs were stripped of bark while frozen, cut into sheets that were hand-shaved and then cut into narrow strips), and I found a stash that had been prepared decades before.<sup>3</sup>

The first step involved softening the strips in water to make them pliable, and I was immediately struck by the pleasant aroma the damp wood exuded. Working with the delicate wefts was completely absorbing, for there was a right and wrong side to each strip, and each had to lay perfectly flat, aligned precisely so no sharp edges would cut into the warp threads. As I gave myself over to the exacting task, I felt connected to the people who had come up with this laborious process and experienced the same kind of

{below} *Detail of a Yoruba beaded scabbard, Nigeria, 20th century.*

{bottom} *This rich and exquisitely worked textile is believed to be a late 19th-century coffin cover. Its origin is unknown.*





{top} Detail of Shaker poplar cloth fabric, c. 1910.

{above} Detail of a shawl made by the author from handspun wool dyed with natural dyestuffs, 1970s.

quiet intensity while engaged with it, connected to the materials, and even connected to the poplar trees that had supplied them. Poplar cloth may be an unusual fabric, but the depth of this kind of cloth-making experience is not. One of the reasons that textiles “matter” is that they may bring those who deal with them into states of absorption and communion.

Many of my experiences with cloth have been journeys of intellectual discovery. For example, I was able to visit some of the last **textile mills** in New England when they were closing down in the early 1970s. The experience of standing among literally acres of industrial spinning and weaving equipment helped me understand the scope of the early textile industry, and led me further into labor history. Learning about the workings of the machinery also gave me an abiding respect for human ingenuity and invention. At about the same time, I studied spinning and dyeing. Experimenting with **natural dye recipes** necessitated a review of basic chemistry, and the process of seeking native dye plants brought me deeper into gardening and an understanding of seasonal rhythms and the local ecology. I learned to look more closely at the landscape, scanning for potential sources of color. While I have lived in the Midwest for over thirty years, it is the New England landscape I came to know so closely in that period that is most deeply imprinted on my mind. Learning to spin also contributed to my knowledge of plants, and I became more attuned to wool- and fur-bearing animals, learning to see sheep, goats, and even dogs and rabbits with a new understanding.

The fiber art movement was burgeoning in the 1970s, and it was a time when many artists, especially women, were beginning to look with new appreciation and respect at textile traditions from around the world. The first books that attempted to look at investigate worldwide textile history were published at this time. There was a simultaneous explosion of works publications that dealt with topics such as the history of hooked rugs, dyeing in Africa, and cardweaving in Egypt<sup>4</sup>—topics that were formerly arcane or known only to a few intrepid travelers, but were suddenly available to us all. Everything I learned in this heady period led me to something else and opened up new areas of investigation. Working on my book *Feltmaking: Traditions, Techniques and Contemporary Explorations* led me to learn about the cultures of Central Asia and the archaeological finds in the Scythian tombs in the Ural Mountains. It brought me to visit a factory that produced Stetson-type cowboy hats, and to connect with individuals who had studied shepherd’s protective garments in Turkey and Hungary. In turn, feltmaking led me to the related subject of cloth finishing. I found obscure recordings of women singing at “waulking bees” on the Hebridean islands (see chapter 3); I prowled through fields of fuller’s teasel to learn about the plant; I scanned the Bible to find verses about “fuller’s earth.” (This kind of open-ended investigation is much more common—and simple—with the advent of the worldwide web, but decades ago, such explorations were still unusual and quite exhilarating.) I conducted controlled experiments with acrylic coatings.



{top} Ben Shan’s untitled painting depicting a textile mill was made in the 1930s as part of the U.S. Public Works Administration commissioned artworks for public buildings.



{above, left} A shepherd from western Anatolia is wearing a *kepenek*, an age-old protective felt cloak.

{above, right} Felt hats on display in a shop in Istanbul, Turkey, 2009.



View of completed, unbroken silk cocoons.

Long after earning a Ph.D. with a specialty in textile history and teaching about these topics to generations of university students, I am still awestruck by the most fundamental textile phenomena. The **silkworm**, for example, will always remain a wonderful mystery. I still love to unravel the fiber end of a cocoon—the fiber the worm has extruded from its body—and contemplate how the creature wrapped it around and around for up to half a mile (nearly a kilometer). I have recently encountered an intriguing **silk** felt fabric the Miao (Hmong) people of China make by forcing silkworms to build their cocoons on a flat plane—it produces sheets of matted silk rather than round cocoons<sup>5</sup>—and I love to touch the paper-like fabric. Fascinating as this phenomenon is, I am no less delighted by contemplating the “regular” or “ordinary” **felting** process I discovered decades ago. **Loose wool** is laid out on a mat and then subjected to moisture and heavy pressure. These few steps can result in a non-woven fabric that is solid and warm enough to cover a house and provide protection in the coldest climate.

Over the course of my career, I have investigated many different kinds of textiles: American **Indian baskets and beadwork**, sentimental 1930s samplers, Victorian fancywork, Guatemalan and Chinese costume, the work of individual fiber artists. I have been privileged to have had inspiring mentors, and to have worked side by side with many of the talented and dedicated people in the textile field. I have also been able to work closely with several textile collections and develop a range of classes concerned with textile appreciation. My students have taught me a great deal, for they continually ask questions that lead to new avenues of investigation. I bring this accumulated wealth of ideas, information and inspiration to this volume. If I can communicate even a fraction of my enthusiasm and passion for this subject to others, I will feel that I have succeeded in passing on the gifts that were given to me.

A note on terminology and scope is in order here. I essentially use the words “cloth,” “textile,” and “fabric” interchangeably in this book, both because they do largely function as synonyms in English, and because the different terms allow me to craft more interestingless repetitive sentences and livelier text. I also take an inclusive approach to “textiles,” including the fiber (string, thread, cord, etc) that cloth is made with, as well as finished fabrics. I do not limit my discussion to soft, pliable cloth, but include baskets, which are made with the same fibrous linear elements and interlace techniques; they demand similar skills and decisions on the part of their makers, and serve many of the same functions. In short, they can be considered “hard” textiles. I also consider skins as cloth, at least when they are treated as fabric, and are sewn and stitched.

I am not primarily concerned here with dress, or with fashion, although as my own stories of early cloth memories indicate, the topics are never completely separable. Clothes are made from textiles, and many of the important textile traditions are made to be displayed on the body. Thus, I do at times talk about garments, but I do not focus on style, silhouette, or the fashion system. These topics are very well covered elsewhere; there is a vast

and growing body of literature on clothing and adornment. I remain focused on the textiles—the cloth—or their component parts.

This book is not the first to address the vital importance of textiles, but I believe it is the first to do so with such a broad scope and holistic approach. Discussion is not limited to one aspect of textiles, to one technique or style, one period in history, or one area of the world. I build on the work of many thoughtful researchers who have come before me. Elizabeth Barber discussed the importance of cloth in the development of civilization in *Women’s Work: The First 20,000 Years: Women, Cloth and Society in Early Times* (1994), for example, and anthropologists Annette Weiner and Jane Schneider edited a remarkable volume, *Cloth and Human Experience* (1989), which essentially argued that to study cloth was a way to study society.<sup>6</sup>

These studies were by design more narrowly focused. Barber was not concerned with more recent periods or the full range of textile meanings. Weiner and Schneider considered cloth in social, political and economic

Center detail of a Miao embroidered silk felt hanging or dance apron, China, probably late 20th century.





Some of the garments worn by the Umatilla girl seen in this 1910 photograph are made from materials that are not always thought of as “textiles,” although they are treated that way in this book. Her hat is essentially a corn husk basket, ornamented with wool, and her dress is made of sewn buckskin ornamented with beads. The Umatilla live in northeastern Oregon.

life, but were less concerned with its importance on individual or spiritual levels. More recently (2002), Colin Gale and Jasbir Kauer tried to map out the general importance of cloth in *The Textile Book*.<sup>7</sup>

They too are interested in textiles and human life, but they approach the field primarily from the perspective of textile design and the textile industry. Their examples are less global in scope, and are also not concerned with individual stories or spiritual contexts.

Others have focused more specifically on topics such as gender roles (women as cloth-makers), textiles in trade, or the textiles of specific cultures. Exciting work is also being done on the new technological advancements in textiles. I bring this rich material together, using the particulars that I and others have written about to construct a comprehensive overview. My discussion not only bridges past and present and extends across the globe, but integrates the fields of art, science, history, and anthropology. I consider both the exceptional (the magnificent textiles made for Pre-Columbian rulers, African kings or Chinese emperors) and the everyday (“homely” textiles such as gauze bandages, apron ties, and salt bags).

Lest this overview seem too grandiose, I readily admit I could *never* include every aspect of this vast subject. While I’ve tried to make my points by drawing on diverse examples, I have unquestionably left a great deal out. Readers may think of many other relevant stories or details that they think are important. There may well be even more compelling stories than the ones I have chosen to make any given point—certainly there is no dearth of examples about oppressive conditions in the textile industry, for example, and there are thousands of other artists whose work I might have chosen to include as examples of creative expression. I learn new things about textiles all the time, and were I to write the book at a later date, I would no doubt be struck by new information and provide many different cases in point. If there are readers who feel frustrated that the textiles they are personally passionate about are not included, I can easily empathize. In a sense, however, readers’ disappointment might be a sign of success; it would indicate that I have indeed helped people think about even more ways that textiles matter. I hope the discussion will continue to expand in new directions, and I welcome feedback and further ideas.

Experience has shown me that the overarching concepts and organizational strategies I use in *Textiles: The Fiber of Our Lives* this book will stay with readers far longer than the specific details I recount. I have presented this material to diverse audiences for a number of years, and many individuals have told me how much the ideas have affected them. Students have repeatedly confirmed that the frameworks I offer allow them to make sense of a vast body of information. I am pleased to offer these same ideas and frameworks to a broader audience, and hope they will provide a similar avenue of understanding and appreciation. Again, my goal is to encourage as many people as I can to see the importance of this topic to our human story. Textiles are part of the fiber of our lives, and they matter deeply.

I would like to share one final story that speaks to both my background and motivations for writing this book. In the mid-1970s when I was beginning to study textiles in earnest, I was also studying meditation and learning about some of the esoteric traditions of the world. I came upon a concept that caught my imagination completely; though the expression seems trite, it did almost take my breath away. In Hindu philosophy, it is a textile that serves as the primary metaphor about the human condition. Hindus maintain that we are all cloaked in a web of illusion, unable to see the essential wholeness of creation or our fundamental unity with God. Because we live under—or inside—this “veil of Maya,” we experience ourselves as separate beings. The veil keeps us from seeing the spiritual planes that lie beyond it. Caught by its materiality, we remain in the incarnate, dense, physical realm, knowing reality only as that which we see, touch, and feel through our senses. Everything we think we “know”—the world of forms and names, the world of individuality—is Maya. Paradoxically, the veil has been created specifically so that we can come to *know* we are in illusion; the very purpose of human life is to break free of the veil to experience unity with the divine. A parallel image was used by the ancient Egyptians. They spoke of the seven stoles of Isis, the great mother who created a “garment of matter.”<sup>8</sup>

Captivated by this textile metaphor for the human condition, I dreamed of making a literal veil of Maya as a room-sized art installation. I envisioned people walking into a space filled with a shimmering, gauzy white textile, which would essentially ensnare them. Light would shine through and they could push the threads aside, but it would be all-encompassing. I wanted it to be stunningly beautiful, like the earth itself; I pictured making it in hundreds of different yarns and threads, some of which were beaded or shot with silver, and using a range of techniques including weaving, crochet and netting. The veil would be so visually interesting that visitors would get lost in its details; they would literally experience, as a kind of epiphany, the web of illusion we are caught in. Unfortunately, my vision was stronger than my technical prowess. I couldn’t resolve the logistical problems or find the way to make this vision really come to life. I feel, however, that through this book I am in some ways revisiting my long-ago dream. While I am not making a literal textile, I am fashioning a kind of textile “installation,” filled with the same kind of complexity and variety. Like the veil of Maya, my book is concerned with the highly-engaging practical, earthly plane we all live in, as well as the mythic, transcendent planes we are sometimes able to glimpse fleetingly. I hope this volume will shimmer for my readers, and lead them to discoveries and understandings that will stay with them, deep in their beings.