

# From legendary textiles to fibre art cultural studies essay



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## **Résumé**

Dans le Manifeste pour la métamorphose du monde, le philosophe Edgar Morin, Pierre Gonod et l'artiste Paskua déclarent, en 2009, que la compréhension du monde est impossible compte tenu du morcellement actuel de la pensée. Ainsi prônent-ils le développement d'une conscience planétaire, la sauvegarde de l'unité et de la diversité du genre humain. La métamorphose suppose une appétence à transformer le regard et la perception. Notre vision est parcellaire, nos frontières mentales étant souvent plus puissantes et fermes. Afin d'élargir cette vision, il nous a semblé essentiel – pour la découverte, la contemplation et à la réflexion – de prendre l'exacte mesure des particularités mais aussi de la diversité des arts textiles, des fibres et de techniques utilisées dans Fiber Art. Compte tenu des contraintes imposées par un monde de plus en plus globalisé, l'art textile, avec ses ressources sociétales et d'humanité, peut fournir des éléments pour une identité, si l'on devait en donner une.

## **Mots-clés**

L'art textile, Fiber Art, diversité, identité culturelle, savoir-fair.

## **Abstract**

In the 2009 Manifest pour métamorphose du monde (Manifest for the metamorphosis of the world) the great philosopher Edgar Morin, Pierre Gonod and the artist Paskua declared that understanding the world is impossible with the current fragmentation of thinking. They took the

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development of a global conscience and the safeguard of human unity and diversity. The metamorphosis bears in itself the wish to transform vision and perception. Our vision is fragmentary, our mental borders often being stronger. To widen this vision, it seemed essential to discover, contemplate and think in order to appreciate the particularity but also the diversity of fibres and techniques in fibre art. In a more and more globalised world textiles illustrate both society and humanity.

## **Keywords**

Textile art, Fiber Art, diversity, cultural identity, know-how. This article follows a necessary process of understanding these transformations from artisanal to organizational culture. The question is whether we can describe, evaluate, and preserve our cultural heritage not just to understand its various dimensions but to acknowledge the importance of the fact that everyone interacts with their own specific cultural hallmarks. There is no need to replace the general view of culture, ideologies, terms and definitions to highlight the value of textiles, this very particular cultural heritage of mankind, but to understand the relationship of traditionally transmitted arts with contemporary textiles. This applies not only to the concept of cultural landscape related to textile art but to the cultural policy with international interest and concepts that have been opening the gates of these particular fields of contemporary art. Textile Art today deals with transformations such as the magic of metamorphosis, where the imaginary of the mind and the skilfulness of the hands unite to create a rich textile universe filled with tradition, innovation, creativity and modernity. To understand these unbelievable transformations of textiles, from fiber to Fiber Art, let's start

with some myths and legendary stories. In ancient times, textile arts were held in high esteem. The Greek goddess Athena<sup>[1]</sup> was the favourite child of all-powerful Zeus<sup>[2]</sup> and oversaw everything from wisdom and war to the arts, industry, justice and skills. She was also known for her wonderful skills with weaving. Another famous mythological legend is about a maiden named Arachne<sup>[3]</sup>. She refused to acknowledge that her knowledge came, in part at least, from the goddess Athena, challenging her to a weaving contest. Arachne made a magnificent tapestry and Athena was envious of her success. Offended by the girl's choice of subjects (The Loves and Transgressions of The Gods) she destroyed the tapestry and the loom and transformed her into a spider. Also, besides Athena there is a well-known legend of other three powerful daughters of Zeus who used threads to direct the lives of humans and other gods. There is another well-known legend, that of Ariadne<sup>[4]</sup> string and her love for Theseus. The Greeks believed that life was spun by Clotho<sup>[5]</sup>, measured by Lakheis<sup>[6]</sup> and the thread of life is cut by Aetropos<sup>[7]</sup>. These three sisters were known as The Fates or Moirai<sup>[8]</sup>. The idea that life was spun around a person upon birth was a popular one in Greek mythology, literature and also in poetry. We can see the three Moirai, or The Triumph of Death, represented in a Flemish tapestry (c. a. 1520), in the collection of Victoria&Albert Museum, London. Related to the thread of life stories in ancient China there is a legend of the Red String of Fate<sup>[9]</sup>, thread which tells that when children are born, invisible red threads connect them to the ones whom they are fated to be with. Over the years of their lives they come closer and eventually find each other, overcoming the distance between them. It's also popular in the tradition of the far Eastern

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cultures. Another interesting legend originated from the Rari village located at the foot of the Andes in Chile, where a girl finds a horsehair on the surface of the village river and starts to create a small fiber piece. This technique of crin is one of Chile's most distinctive folk crafts, halfway between weaving and basketry was born here over 250 years ago, and it's still practiced by the local women to create objects or small figures, plaited disks from coloured horsehair. After discovering the flexibility of horsehair they combined a Mexican plant fibre Ixtle (so called Tampico) which provided structural strength. Later on, this plaited disk became the emblem of the village flag, and so the horsehair became the new Chilean gold[10] These legends or other themes related to textile, or textile art, such as the transformation of fibers, the symbolism of the threads are related to the evolution of the Man, as a transmitter of know-how, all converge to form a history of innovation, a series of extraordinary transformations, which are part of the movement of life, nature, environment. In a global view all continents with their own particularities meet around this heritage to join contemporary artistic dynamics where creativity and imagination are fully developed in contemporary artworks, where differences mean enrichment, where the experience of the past becomes a possible contemporary practice. In the "Manifest for the metamorphosis of the world" (Manifest pour la métamorphose du monde) [11] PFF the famous philosopher Edgar Morin, together with Pierre Monod, a French futurist and political scientist, and Paskua the artist, advocated the development of a global conscience and the safeguard of human unity and diversity. They stated that our understanding of the world is impossible with a fragmented way of thinking. The confinement of topics makes it impossible to perceive and conceive the

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fundamental and global issues, hence the need for a mentality which links the various fields of knowledge and enables us to conceive the relation among global to local and vice versa. This policy exists to create a social, professional link among various cultural structures and organizations to promote a cultural policy and invite us to think about the importance of our way of thinking and to take part in this big movement of transformations in our contemporary society.

## **From Threads to Fibre Art**

Regarding textiles we can acknowledge the diversity of fibers and techniques, if we take into an environment which invites us to discover, contemplate and think. If we think especially of textiles, it is a unique opportunity to discover, both the technologies of the past - a relay on natural resources, and the present - the use of contemporary materials and processes. This item allows us to have a better understanding of the evolution and transformations of the human condition, meanings and way of living. In textile art today we can highlight the so called extraordinary changes of form, techniques and meanings, spotted, deciphered and assimilated by the eye. Textiles express their most sensitive, striking aspects, a simple but very particular " key-words" system, woven together by means of threads, like landmarks offering information and underlining specific elements. This metamorphosis of textiles is about breaking down the barriers between the fields of knowledge and know-how, techniques and materials, to encourage an intercultural dialog and exchange in a more and more globalised world where there is a tendency to unify all aspects of life. Where inequalities continue to grow, there is willingness and a need to unite

energy of all kinds of nations to preserve and to keep safe this particular textile heritage, which illustrates society and humanity as well. Textiles are shaped depending on the fabric, on the quality of the fibre which is transformed by the maker. This important choice is made according to local resources, but also to a system of values where symbolic stakes, social involvement, historical reasons and economic interests are intermingled. Nowadays, computer applications and processes as well as different types of synthesis materials which used to be only of natural origin, either mineral, vegetal or animal are used to complete textile technology. The use of various types of hair (horse, camel), wool (sheep, goat), cotton or flax was very common in ancient times, as it still is in contemporary textiles because the possibilities are endless. Surprising vegetal fibres are used around the world to make textile pieces in different combinations: bamboo, raffia, rattan, orchid, bark, banana tree fibre, pineapple fibre, palm tree fibre. Animal fibres are just as extraordinary, like sea silk or spider silk. FFP[12]PFFPThe processes of dyeing fibres and materials bring to mind technologies and also pass on cultural and historical identities. We can identify particular ways of dyeing at the level of a continent, country, region or population. For instance, the ancient technique of indigo dyeing (a colour obtained from indigofera plants)FFP[13]is also used today by different artists from different regions in Africa (like Bamako), India, China, Japan but also in some regions of Europe. Before it crystallises, this process is the result of an operation chain involving several craftspeople located in different places; it is the result of different hands working on the fabric which becomes the mirror of their universe. There are a lot of different dyeing processes, transmitted from generation to generation, such as ikatFFP[14]PFFP which is used today

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all over the world by contemporary artists but also by a Philippine tribe, T'nalak, who uses the traditional weaving methods with abaka fibre (buntal and piña), also called "manila hemp". FFP[15]PFFP PWe can see that techniques based on traditions create a new space of existence, a so called cross-fertilization, where there are no limits to creativity so artists resort to these techniques to create contemporary works. Some of the rare pieces of our textile heritage are like witnesses of human inventiveness and creativity. In China, the tubular beads made of bamboo during the Qing Dynasty period, were used to create clothes which allowed the skin to breathe and prevented them from sticking to the skin during the hot humid season. A chest armour made by rattan and orchid fibres in Central Highlands of New Guinea, by the Daani ethnic people, a vertical rigid tubular structure made of rattanFFP[16]PFF, creates a texture like a ribbed knit garment with "threads" made of straps and stems rolled around a core of vegetal twisted fibres. Another tubular weaving system used by the same ethnic people represents a true technical feat when: they attach a thread hank to a fixed point, distribute the threads in two groups in order to create warp and weft, then they plait them in spirals. The result is an interesting and elegant extensible sheet, dyed according to the plangiFFP[17]PFF technique, designed for ceremonies, marking the important moments of life (engagements, funerals etc.). Another example is a piece of African textile, made by beaten bark. Before the use of cotton fabric and clothing for the population of the Congo Basin, the beaten bark loincloths were the only piece of clothing. After a series of operations (soaking, pressing, during) the manufacturers obtained a flexible and resistant fabric, which was passed under the crotch, and tied to the waist with a belt. These pieces of cloth were <https://assignbuster.com/from-legendary-textiles-to-fibre-art-cultural-studies-essay/>



decorated with hand painted stripes and geometrical ornaments by the women of the tribe. Ancient textiles, techniques, materials are always references, a source of inspiration for contemporary artworks. Today, everything comes together as a single garment: art, design and craft, the expression of one's inner artistic self. From loincloth to fine cloth, this transformation has become a concept: art to wear, or Wearable Art, in what functionality is concerned, followed by items of fashion design, draping bodies, more in tune with a body's form often superseding the fabric original purpose to cover and protect. In order to illustrate a few specific aspects of textiles by analysing their importance, value and meanings throughout time we should briefly examine the case of Fiber Art taking it as an example: in most of the cultural artistic papers and speeches, Fiber Art is a term referred to both, a new and an old art form. " The use of fibrous materials as a medium for art works is not new; woven, knitted, printed, and otherwise treated materials have long appeared in the history of mankind."(Henning, 1977)FFP[18]PFF " Traditionally, however, they appeared as functional objects. The term Fiber Art, sometimes called art fabric, was introduced after the 2PndP World War to characterize new art developments in textiles. This article deals only with the fibre art developments since 2PndP World War and the challenges presented in describing that art for inclusion in text and image databases. In time, databases may even contain the sounds of fibres as they move in currents of air. For present use, however, it is difficult enough to concentrate on the description of the physical appearance and condition, the composition, content, and design, and the intent of the art." P P(Lunin, 1990)In the 1950s came a period of serious recognition of the artist - craftsman's contribution in not only fibrous but in several media. During <https://assignbuster.com/from-legendary-textiles-to-fibre-art-cultural-studies-essay/>

this period, the studio artist revolutionized the creative concept of the object. In the late 1950s, Lenore Tawney, a weaver, moved into three dimensional forms with " constructions, evoking the power and spatial relationships of sculpture" (Nordness, 1970)FFP[19]PFF. In 1961 the opening of Tawney's exhibition at the Staten Island Museum was the first major exhibition of American Art Fabrics. This event marked the point at which " Fiber Art was healthfully and joyously launched in America" (Constantine & Larsen, 1981). Nowhere had the sense of creativity and imagination been captured better than in the contemporary concept of Fiber Art, which started with the American expressionism artistic trend, during the ' 60s. Almost at the same time a similar artistic phenomenon started in Europe with the first Tapestry Biennial of LausanneFFP[20]PFF (first edition in 1962), with the participation of Polish artists, Maria Chojnacka, Krystyna Czarnocka, Wojciech Sadley, Magdalena AbakanowiczFFP[21]PFF - who initiated a new trend in textile art, through the new technical freedom and conceptual subjects - drawing from intuition, rather than convention. " This is the point where the organic meets the non - organic, where the still alive meets that which is already dead, where all that exist in oppression meet all that strive for liberation in every meaning of this word." - wrote Artur Starewicz about her works. These Polish textile artists redefined textile art during the ' 60s and ' 70s by combining the power of expression creating innovative forms with a deep respect for the qualities of the materials and their textures which later characterized the " Polish School of Weaving". As a Collective artistic team they revolutionized the field of textiles and established weaving as a medium for translating abstract concepts into tactile textiles, works of art. The French tradition of tapestry making which meant weaving with fine wool, linen or silk, was <https://assignbuster.com/from-legendary-textiles-to-fibre-art-cultural-studies-essay/>

transformed by the Polish weavers when they introduced in their work uneven handspun wool, thick cotton cord, and hemp rope. By exploiting the organic qualities of these materials, using unconventional weft yarns, they created an intuitively developed texture with a very particular expressivity. Following this artistic development there is a very particular and special kind of Fiber Art in Japan. I would like to mention just a few important artist and works presented in New York at Japan Society's Galleries, last year, and this year at The Museum of Craft and Folk Art (MOCFA) in San Francisco with the exhibition entitled Fiber Futures: Japan's Textile Pioneers : Akio Hamatani's "W-Orbit", Hiroko Watanabe's FFP[22] PFF "Red Pulse", Fuminori Ono's "Feel the Wind", Reiko Sûdo's "Fabrication", Atsuko Yoshioka's "Construction for a String Quartet", Mitsuko Akutsu's "Time J-15", Kinya Koyama and Kioku Suru Jikû collective work "Space-Time's Memory". Since textiles contain functional and symbolic references for everyone, we each have invisible connections to the media and consequently possess an idiosyncratic relationship with various textile materials. It is these invisible connections that contemporary artists seek to investigate and exploit through their appropriation of materials, tools and techniques, previously the sphere of only domestic makers." P19P(Lawrence, 2011) Through textile art, there is a network that functions as a world reference, a heritage network which corresponds to the idea of opening up to appreciate the permanence and innovation of know-how and the perpetuation of human genius. Through textiles, crafts and arts, Fiber Arts, creation reveals the expression of cultural identity, the link between the artisanal and the artistic, becoming a metamorphosis of materials, from its natural state to textile, enriched with colours, motifs, meanings, concepts, illustrating the diversity of textile know-

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how. Textiles reflect societies and reveal unique human experiences aiming to change the regular point of view to enrich the perception of the contemporary world.

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