

ENVISIONING A NEW WORLD

In the aftermath of World War I, avant-garde artists across Europe sought to realize utopian social visions through their work. Some expanded the geometric abstraction that characterized their paintings and drawings to the design of textiles for mass production; others created artworks using traditional craft techniques.

Among the Constructivists in Moscow, painters rejected their fine art practices to design fabrics and apparel for the modern Soviet woman. At the Bauhaus—a German academy that between 1919 and 1933 sought to unify art, design, and craft under the umbrella of architecture—the focus turned increasingly to well-designed, affordable, industrially fabricated wares for the modern world. In the school’s weaving workshop, Gunta Stölzl, Anni Albers, and their cohort handloomed swatches for mass-produced furnishing fabrics and wove one-of-a-kind wall hangings, in related styles, for domestic interiors.

LINE INVOLVEMENTS

Following the closure of the Bauhaus under pressure from the Nazi regime in 1933, Anni Albers and her colleagues fled Germany, seeding the school’s holistic philosophy and materials-based instruction in other parts of the world. Albers settled in North Carolina, where she taught at the experimental liberal arts school Black Mountain College through the 1940s. There, she began to explore weaving’s material properties, techniques, and social role. Through her artworks, writing, teaching, and designs for furnishing fabrics, she dominated textile discourse in the later twentieth century.

In the Americas, an emerging generation of weavers shared Albers’s commitment to formal and technological experimentation as well as her reverence for the ancient textiles of Central and South America. Approaching filament and thread in ways that other artists used the drawn line, they transformed the decorative wall hanging into a fiber art form. Concurrently, vanguard New York artists, committed to making process a determining feature of their practices, adopted pliable, everyday materials aligned with textiles—including string, cord, rope, and wire—to upend sculptural norms.

GRIDS, NETS, AND KNOTS

The grid is inherent in plain weave, the simplest of weave structures: Used worldwide, it is composed by interlacing warp and weft threads, one over and one under. For many postwar fiber artists, however, the grid was not simply a structural element but integral to a textile’s form, design, and meaning. Also predominant in modernist abstraction, the grid came under fire from painters in France and the United States during the 1970s. Seeking an art form grounded in the material world, they drew from myriad sources, including Celtic interlace and Islamic decorative arts, or deconstructed and reweave the canvas support to foreground its textile substructure. Others prioritized alternatives to the ubiquitous grid, such as knotted nets and webs.

Despite close formal and material affinities linking their practices, these fiber and abstract artists inhabited different discursive and institutional realms, segregated by theoretical constructs. Only in the 1990s, when new digital technologies revitalized abstraction on multiple fronts, did those once impregnable borders begin to dissolve. Today, algorithmic data and electronic hardware are generative for makers across a range of disciplines.

LABOR

The design and manufacture of cloth and clothing must be considered within the context of their production. Exploitative labor practices in low-wage economies currently fuel a trillion-dollar textile industry premised on racial, ethnic, and wealth disparities. Fast fashion—unregulated, sped-up production, marketing, and consumption cycles that create great waste and environmental degradation worldwide—has become the norm.

Working across a range of mediums, the artists in this gallery call out the textile industry's unrelenting quest for profit—as well as consumer complicity. Others trouble a discourse that too often risks reducing labor issues to formulaic binaries: local versus global production; free versus alienated work; tradition versus innovation; manual versus mechanized modes of making.

“LIFE WEAR” AND SELF-FASHIONING

The countercultural, punk, and various liberation movements of the 1960s and '70s—which fought for women's, queer, and civil rights—prioritized attire as a form of self-representation: a means of constructing identity and expressing social values. During that era, factory-produced knitted fabrics outpaced woven variants for the first time since the Industrial Revolution, and new synthetic textiles began to flood the market.

Taking on board these major social, technological, and material shifts, a cohort of women artists who came to maturity from the mid-1980s on fused dress, textile, and art making as they explored the politics of “life wear” through feminist-informed lenses. While spurred by dissident postwar styles, they also embraced the cross-disciplinary practices of radical artists from the early twentieth century, represented in the first gallery of this exhibition. Sassy and sly, aspirational and pragmatic, their garments embody disaffection with mainstream culture.

BASKETRY CULTURES

Basketry is an ancient textile art—a pre-loom technology foundational to cultures throughout human history. That said, basketry's relation to modernist art histories was peripheral until the 1960s, when American weaver, writer, and teacher Ed Rossbach first championed the art form. “A basket as a work of art is linked to all other baskets, even the most utilitarian, ordinary, and anonymous,” he observed. In parallel, modernist sculptors enamored of vernacular forms reframed their discipline by adopting traditional artisanal techniques involving looping, knotting, and wickerwork.

In many non-Western cultures, however, basketry's enormously varied lineages and techniques have long been venerated. Though the bamboo arts are essential to the tea ceremony in Japan, beginning in the late twentieth century craftsmen skilled in that rarified genre adopted nonfunctional forms and novel modes of interlace. Recently, in North America and Australia, Indigenous artists have revived basketry practices as part of a collective impulse to preserve cultural legacy.

COMMUNITY AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

The artworks in this final gallery amplify issues of self-fashioning, which, though explored in earlier eras, loom ever large in contemporary geopolitical debates. Where dress formerly signified personal and subcultural affiliations, the ritualistic garments displayed here center questions of collective belonging in the public arena. Conceived for performance but also intended for display, they celebrate disenfranchised communities, underrepresented on the national stage.

Likewise, tapestries, rugs, and wall hangings may serve as touchstones of kinship for individuals who have experienced—or are threatened with—dislocation, displacement, and loss of roots. These artists' material and conceptual sources are many and diverse: In certain instances, ethnic and vernacular heritages play vital roles; in others, solidarity is rooted in class or in race-based and religious lineages and legacies. For many, textiles model queer and feminist commitments.