

## Midwestern Fiber Collections: Intelligent, Intuitive, Independent

Ed.—On November 11, 2006, at the SOFA Chicago expo, Fiberarts sponsored a panel presentation, *The Art of Collecting Fiber: Four Perspectives*, which involved curator/critic Polly Ullrich, collectors Cathy Wice and Sharon Hoogendoorn, and gallerist Jane Sauer. Ullrich spoke about her experience in curating the exhibition *Material Difference: Soft Sculpture and Wall Works*, which is at the Chicago Cultural Center through January 7. This exhibition, mounted in honor of the fifteenth anniversary of the organization Friends of Fiber Art International, consists of 155 artworks from thirty-three public and private collections in the Midwest. The following remarks, adapted from Ullrich's talk, reflect observations about the collections she encountered as she chose works for the show.

Most of the artworks in *Material Difference* came from private collecting by individuals. The collections that I saw were located in many settings, from Victorian townhouses to modernist suburban spreads. There were collectors who raised children in the midst of precious fiber sculptures, integrating the whirl of

family life with the appreciation of art. There were also many collectors who opened their homes continuously to both private receptions and public gatherings, thus serving as public advocates for fiber art in their own homes.

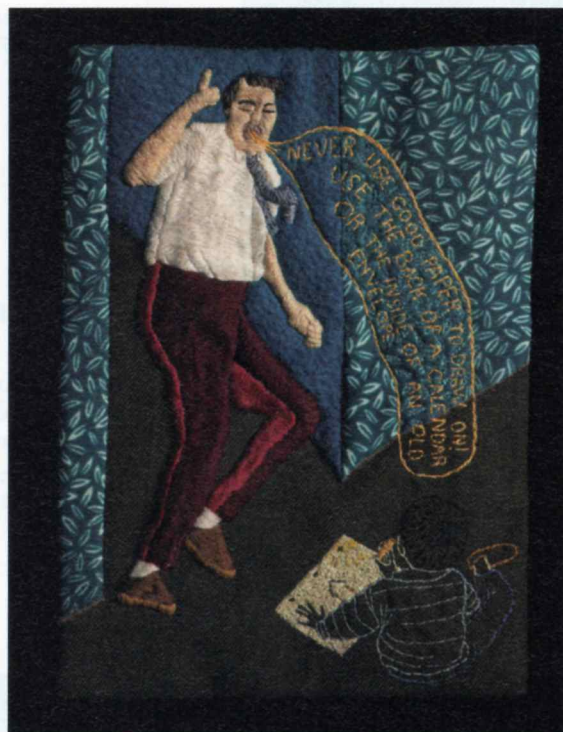
There were collections that were only composed of one kind of fibrous form, such as baskets. There were a number of Chicago collections that documented what could be called the early classical pioneers of fiber art, with works by such masters as Magdalena

*ABOVE:* Barbara Cooper, *Aria*, 1995; wood veneer furniture strips; 48" x 91" x 36". Collection of Racine Art Museum (gift of Karen Johnson Boyd). *RIGHT:* Darrel Morris, *Good Paper*, 2002; thread and canvas; 8" x 6 1/2". Collection of Michael McVickar and Brian Westphal. Both works are in the *Material Difference* exhibition.

Abakanowicz, Zofia Butrymowicz, Sheila Hicks, Sherri Smith, and others. Other collections were very general—fiber art being one of many different kinds of art brought together in a broad collection.

My first reaction to my tours through private homes was that I had never seen so many spotlessly clean houses. But once that reaction subsided and I had been assured that this wasn't the way they always looked, I began to gather some additional observations about what I was seeing. I began to understand that fiber-art collecting seemed to be an interesting combination of both intuition and research, that it was an occupation that used both the intellect as well as the emotions. A first rule of collecting is always Do Your Homework, and it was obvious that these collectors had done just that—they had talked to art specialists; they had visited museums, art fairs, and galleries; they were in touch with art trends by reading magazines and books; they got to know their artists; they became knowledgeable in fiber techniques—and all this research had resulted in first-rate, intelligent collections.

But fiber art is also a visual language which helps us to grasp the world around us, to explore new ideas, and to define our sense of being. While they were well educated, most collectors seemed to be just





as frequently motivated by their emotional responses to the art—they were moved by the depth, the wit, grief, alienation, or commitment implied in these art objects. In this respect, their motivation seemed to me to be a bit like an artist's.

A second observation was that to be a collector of fiber art in the Midwest takes independence and a willingness to exercise one's aesthetic eye on the fringes of what has been commonly recognized as art in the past. Although we are all active travelers in a globalized society, to live in the Midwest is to live outside of the most fashionably recognized art centers. To be a fiber-art collector in the Midwest means to be comfortable with one's instincts and with what draws one to a specific work. This often leads to collections with distinct personalities and an eye for the sublime and the unusual.

The Material Difference exhibition is

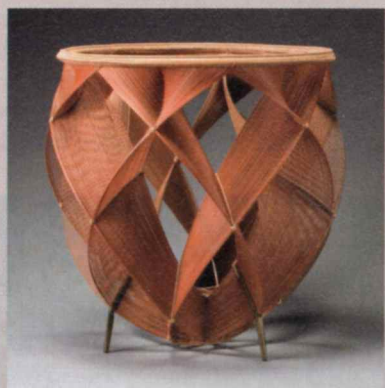
a prime example of the recognition that art collecting sometimes involves making one's holdings available to the larger public. During my research for this exhibition, I encountered this comment from a collector, an investment-firm owner, who once said: "We're investment people. We like to see a return on our investments, and the only real return you get in art—no matter what anyone will tell you—is the pleasure it gives. And it's not a genuine pleasure if you think 'By God! I'm the only one enjoying this.' It has to be shared." In that spirit, I would like to thank all of the collectors who contributed work to Material Difference.

A catalog (96 pages, \$24.95) is available from distributor University of Washington Press at [www.washington.edu/uwpress](http://www.washington.edu/uwpress) or from Friends of Fiber Art International at PO Box 468, Western Springs, IL 60558. (708) 246-9466; [karenziemba@hotmail.com](mailto:karenziemba@hotmail.com).

## Cotsen Collections Featured

**CERTAINLY ONE OF THE GRANDDADDIES** of collectors in the realms of textiles and fiber has to be Lloyd E. Cotsen. Works from two of his collections are on view in early 2007.

In Boston, *Designing the Modern Utopia: Soviet Textiles from the Lloyd Cotsen Collection* continues at the Museum of Fine Arts through January 21. This group consists of machine-made textiles that had been left in textile factories when they closed; it's part of Cotsen's Textile Traces study collection of thousands of small textiles and textile fragments.



In San Francisco, *Masters of Bamboo: Japanese Baskets and Sculpture from the Cotsen Collection* will be at the Asian Art Museum February 2–May 6. The pieces on view draw from the 832 objects in the Lloyd Cotsen Japanese Bamboo Basket Collection, which he donated to the museum in 2002.

During Cotsen's years as chairman and CEO at the soap and cosmetics company Neutrogena, he collected folk-art objects, including many textiles. This collection of 2,600 objects—featured in the book *Extraordinary in the Ordinary* [Harry N. Abrams, 1998] by Mary Hunt Kahlenberg—is now housed in the Neutrogena Wing of the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe. In recent years, Cotsen has continued to acquire small textiles, as well as children's books, educational toys, and games (the latter collection numbers more than 100,000 objects and is being donated to Princeton).

ABOVE: *Shōno Shōunsai, Shimmering of Heated Air (flower basket), c. 1969; bamboo (madake), rattan, copper alloy; thousand line construction; 13 3/4" x 14" x 14". Photo: Kaz Tsuruta. From the upcoming exhibition at the Asian Art museum, San Francisco.*

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