

Collecting Trends Today

by J. Susan Isaacs

If one word can describe or explain changes in the collecting world over the past 25 years, it is “Internet.” The globalization of commerce via online marketing and the use of the Internet for research have produced a vastly different world for artists, collectors, curators, and dealers. There have been other changes, too, such as the growth of international art fairs, the incorporation of technology and alternative materials into art making, the more casual lifestyle of today’s younger generation, and the impact of the DIY aesthetic. However, overwhelmingly, the majority of art enthusiasts view the most profound differences related to the Internet.* Artists today market themselves via their websites, successful galleries utilize online tools—from websites to social media to e-blasts—to attract collectors, and curators research art and artists on the Web.

The Friends of Fiber Art International (FoFAI), celebrating its 20th anniversary, is a nonprofit organization that supports the collecting of fiber art through its many activities. These include a website that lists fiber-art exhibitions on display and grant opportunities for artists, writers, and curators. Camille Cook, an important collector of fiber art and founder of the organization, states that FoFAI has given over a quarter of a million dollars to support exhibitions and publications since its establishment in 1991. The organization is currently examining how to best serve a younger population of fiber enthusiasts. Cook acknowledges that it is becoming more difficult to identify young collectors, and that there are some who view the art world as increasingly interdisciplinary. She also feels that the economic downturn has made it more difficult for people to collect art, but remains optimistic about the role of FoFAI in encouraging the collecting of

textile and fiber art works. FoFAI continues to sponsor guided trips to visit special exhibitions across the US and abroad (including the *14th International Triennial of Tapestry* in Łódź, Poland, next spring), as well as the presentation of public lectures at SOFA Chicago (International Expositions of Sculpture Objects and Functional Art) each November.

Mark Lyman of The Art Fair Company explains that SOFA had one of the first art websites. He views the Internet as a good tool for research but still believes that the art dealer plays an important role in the market. Rick Snyderman of Snyderman-Works Galleries in Philadelphia agrees, considering it his job to educate collectors.



FoFAI founder Camille Cook’s sunroom in Western Springs, IL, features a parachute fabric ceiling piece by **TI HATAMOTO** (*Untitled*, 1985), **JOLANTA RUDZKA-HABISIAK**’s *untitled globe* (1998) made of knotted paper maps, the mixed-media sculpture *Like a Tree She Grows Again* (1989) by **NORMA MINKOWITZ**, and many more.



ABOVE: Installation view of the 8th International Fiber Biennial at Snyderman-Works Galleries during FiberPhiladelphia 2012 featuring works by Shizuko Kimura, Norma Minkowitz, Betsabee Romero, Grethe Wittrock, and many others.
RIGHT: **NORMA MINKOWITZ**
The Present Fiber and mixed media, 26"x 28"x 27", 2011.





Crowds at SOFA Chicago, Navy Pier. Photo: Borter Wagner. Shown courtesy of SOFA CHICAGO 2012.

He is the first to state the importance of the Internet in marketing art. In fact, it was an increase in online sales that led to his redesign of the gallery website. Snyderman's use of social media and e-blasts has also helped to expand his audience, as it has for many other regional galleries across the US.

Fleur Bresler is a well-known collector of fine craft and a generous supporter of the Smithsonian Museum of American Art in Washington, DC, dedicated to American craft. She sees dealers as vital authenticators of value and important mediators between artists and clients, but many galleries she patronized no longer exist. An increasing number of artists today are marketing directly to collectors through their websites, bypassing dealers altogether. For younger artists and collectors who have grown up with computers, utilizing the Internet as a tool is more obvious and more natural than going to a fair or visiting a gallery.

Other collectors, such as Clemmer and David Montague, share similar opinions. They are members of multiple collector support groups including FoFAI and the James Renwick Alliance (JRA), a nonprofit organization dedicated to

advancing scholarship and education on contemporary American craft for over 25 years. Clemmer, the JRA President, sees fewer younger collectors replacing the older generation.

The Montagues suggest two dynamics that impact this change: a more casual lifestyle among the under-40 crowd and a desire to decorate the home with more affordable handmade craft objects. Younger generations no longer desire formal living and dining rooms and therefore do not collect the expensive, one-of-a-kind handcrafted pieces more typical of that setting. David also believes that the gallery scene for craft is rapidly diminishing. As a result, dealers are more likely to participate in international art/craft fairs and operate on the Internet than have a dedicated storefront.

After 25 years as a dealer promoting fiber art and artists, Tom Grotta of browngrotta arts in Connecticut knows firsthand how art fairs and the Internet have gradually replaced the need for a physical gallery space. He asserts that the disappearance of brick-and-mortar operations corresponds with a dwindling collector base that used to drive the market. Grotta finds that he now sells to a broader—but



Installation view of textile works on display at browngrotta arts, Wilton, CT, by (from L to R): Grethe Sørensen, Lilla Kulka, Merja Winqvist, Carolina Yrarrázaval, and basketry by Gyöngy Laky (attended by Woofington the dog). Photo: Tom Grotta.

less predictable—group of people. The majority of these clients purchase a greater range of work, from the less expensive to the costly, primarily via the Internet. “We live in a global economy,” he states. “You have to find a way to reach that market. I sell many more things today to people I don’t know than I do know. It is a less personal business than it used to be.” This is why he believes that gallery websites like www.browngrotta.com, which is heavily trafficked, must be updated daily with excellent images.

Today, browngrotta arts publishes and sells catalogues all over the world, but their physical space in Wilton, Connecticut, is only open to the public for special exhibits every two years. To celebrate the gallery’s 25th anniversary, they will present *Retro/Prospective: 25+ Years of Art Textiles* this fall.

Even curators use the Internet to locate art and artists for their exhibitions. Nicholas R. Bell, the Fleur and Charles Bresler Curator of American Craft and Decorative Art at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, utilized the powerful search abilities of the Internet to seek out artists for the *40 Under 40: Craft Futures* exhibition. The show is on display this fall at the

Renwick Gallery, which celebrates its 40th anniversary this year. He and his associates looked at the work of nearly 2,000 makers via the Internet. In Bell’s opinion, when artists have their own websites, the result is a more democratic art world. Bell employs a broad view of the term “craft,” feeling that definitions and terminology are less important today than in previous generations.

He finds the artistic mindset in the 21st century very different, believing that the type of work being made today has changed as much as the marketing of it. Bell observes that “this generation feels the freedom to make things that are very finely skilled or not. People feel free to concentrate on the process over the object. Doing it makes them feel powerful. It [the artwork] doesn’t have to last.”

This issue of the life of an object is one that Carolyn Ducey, Curator of Collections for the International Quilt Study Center & Museum in Lincoln, Nebraska, faces constantly. She notes that there are many more quilters today, often employing a wider variety of nontraditional techniques and elements in their designs. The IQSC&M is willing to risk more for an artist who



CHUNGHEE LEE *No-name Women* Installation view, photo images, silkscreen printing on handwoven and dyed hemp, 295.28" x 39.37", 2006. Photographed at Scott LaFontsee Gallery, Grand Rapids, MI. Collection of Clemmer and David Montague.

makes compelling work, but in turn the museum is still cautious about collecting pieces made with new methods and materials that have not yet stood the test of time.

Two of the emerging artists included in *40 Under 40* are Joshua DeMonte and Stephanie Liner. Both have sophisticated websites with excellent images, but their work does not fit into traditional craft definitions. DeMonte explains, "The crafts have evolved, but the crafts as we know them, the sense of creating one-off objects, is starting to date itself in the grand scheme of things. In a way, that traditional approach to craft does not have a relationship to the world today, the world of computers and technology... My work is a way of using computers to create objects." He adds that all of his gallery and exhibition opportunities have come to him directly through his website.

Liner creates large-scale sculptural pieces using methods and materials traditional to the furniture and textile belt of the southern

United States. Dealing with the commercial gallery world and art collectors is new territory for her, as her purpose has always been to make the work but not to be concerned with selling it. Like many artists today, she teaches, receives grants, or participates in artist residencies to fund her studio practice. She has only recently begun to consider making smaller works that might be collectable.

Amy Orr, a teacher, fiber artist, and one of the founders of FiberPhiladelphia, an international biennial and regional festival for innovative fiber/textile art, sees a more egalitarian art world emerging in the 21st century. One of the biggest changes is the increasing number of artists who are into DIY art-making and marketing. Her students are finding ways of building businesses and applying their craft to products as well as one-of-a-kind objects, becoming multifaceted entrepreneurs who work in different communities.

Ideologically, this younger generation has also grown up in a consumer culture where products of design are disposable—think Ikea and Target. While they may be interested in collecting craft objects, they tend to purchase them via alternative marketplaces like Etsy (www.etsy.com) and DIY craft fairs, or simply make their own. This growing DIY culture is supported by such television channels as HGTV and websites like DIY Life (www.diy-life.com).

The marketing and collecting of contemporary craft has changed dramatically over the



JOSHUA DEMONTE *Aqueduct Collar* Gypsum, cyanoacrylate, 20" x 22" x 21", 2008. Included in the *40 Under 40: Craft Futures* exhibit at the Renwick Gallery in Washington, D.C. Photo by the artist.



ABOVE: Installation view from the *40 Under 40: Craft Futures* exhibit at the Renwick Gallery featuring works by (from L to R): Stephanie Liner, Andy Paiko, and Christy Matson. Shown courtesy of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.
 RIGHT: STEPHANIE LINER *Momentos of a Doomed Construct* (detail of interior with model) Upholstery, plywood, fabric, sequins, yarn, embroidery, adhesive, cardboard, 80" x 65", 2008. Photo: John Michael Kohler Art Center, Sheboygan, WI.



past two decades as artists have learned to assertively self-promote online and as galleries have shifted to selling work via art fairs and the Internet. The variety of art objects available on the market today possesses an exciting mix of new technologies and disparate media. Varying degrees of longevity and craftsmanship among some of this new work have also resulted in a broader range of prices and collectors. For better or worse, these changing circumstances have produced a more democratic art world. Artists in the 21st century are free to work in any media, show in different types of spaces, and sell to a greater range of collectors through many avenues—both virtual and real.

*The author interviewed all individuals mentioned in the article during the months of June and July 2012.

Friends of Fiber Art International will present a series of contemporary fiber-art lectures during SOFA Chicago (November 2–4) at Festival Hall, Navy Pier; www.friendsoffiberart.org, www.sofaexpo.com.

Snyderman-Works Galleries will have a booth at SOFA Chicago; www.snyderman-works.com. The James Renwick Alliance: www.jra.org. *40 Under 40: Craft Futures* is on display at the Renwick Gallery in Washington, D.C., through February 3, 2013; www.americanart.si.edu/renwick/. Joshua DeMonte: www.joshuademonte.com. Stephanie Liner: www.stephanieliner.com. *Retro/Prospective: 25+ Years of Art Textiles* will be on display at browngrotta arts in Wilton, Connecticut, October 26–November 4; www.browngrotta.com. FiberPhiladelphia: www.fiberphiladelphia.org. *Studio Art Quilt Associates Invitational* exhibition is on display through February 24, 2013 at the International Quilt Study Center and Museum in Lincoln, Nebraska; www.quiltstudy.org.

—J. Susan Isaacs, PhD is Professor and Coordinator of Art History, Curator of the Department of Art + Design, Art Education, and Art History Galleries at Towson University, Towson, Maryland, www.towson.edu/art/galleries.asp; and Curator of Special Projects at the Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts, Wilmington, Delaware, www.thedcca.org.