

Contemporary Textiles Find a Home in America's Heartland

Abstract

The Racine Art Museum (RAM) holds the largest contemporary craft collection in the US. Its representation of contemporary textiles includes specializations in basketry, large-scale sculptures and installations, stitched works, handmade clothing, and contemporary Polish artists. These works are regularly integrated with other craft media, and also works on paper, in changing exhibitions, to place textiles within the context of painting and sculpture movements from the same time period. RAM's goal is to demonstrate what these media have in common rather than how they differ, breaking the categorizations employed by twentieth-century museum models to encourage the public appreciation of textiles.

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Racine, Wisconsin, is located on the western shore of Lake Michigan between Chicago and Milwaukee. This city of 78,000 people is known as the home of Frank Lloyd Wright's SC Johnson Administration Building, one of the famed architect's major works. The Racine Art Museum (RAM), which holds the largest contemporary craft collection of any museum in the United States, has nationally noteworthy collections of objects created in ceramics, fibers, glass, metals, polymer, and wood. It equally values sculptural and functional examples in these media that represent the field in America but also a growing number of countries from around the world. This collection is significantly unusual for an American fine art museum and unique to the region for its focus but also because 43% of RAM's works were created by women artists. The manner in which RAM uses these works is also notable within the craft and textile fields.

RAM collects broadly, amassing pieces created by artists with regional, national, and international reputations in its mission to assemble an accurate record of the explosion of activity that took place in these media in the second half of the twentieth century. The museum also collects artists' works in-depth with examples from early, mid, and late portions in their careers, documenting the development of their aesthetic ideas. The collection numbers over 9,500 pieces and more than half of these are in craft media, providing an increasingly rich documentation of its acceptance as a field where serious artistic statements are made. In an era when the dividing lines between art and craft have become increasingly blurred, self-identified fine artists now produce usable art and craftspeople produce non-utilitarian objects.¹ RAM changes all of its galleries twice each year and the content for these exhibitions comes from its holdings. These objects do not stay on display for prolonged periods of time but are regularly rotated by being included in exhibitions devoted to particular themes and topics.² These are curated to present the objects in different contexts that highlight aspects of each work and encourage multiple interpretations. The same piece could be included in a show on Japanese influences on contemporary western art, the landscape, or the color blue and each exhibition will bring specific

¹ Perreault, John, "Fiber Art: Gathering the Strands," in *Fiber R/Evolution*, exh. cat. (Milwaukee: WI: Milwaukee Art Museum, 1986), 7.

² RAM has five galleries with a total of 3,658 square meters of space and a sidewalk-level gallery that is 1.06 meters deep and 27.4 meters wide. It is oriented to be viewed—even when RAM is closed—from outside the building through large windows similar to a department store display.

qualities of the featured artworks to the forefront. RAM's educational purpose in this approach is to teach the public that one can see different things in the same object on subsequent viewings.

RAM is the outgrowth of the Charles A. Wustum Museum of Fine Arts (Wustum) which opened in 1941 in a house situated on a former dairy farm. Wustum began with without a permanent collection and operated as a Midwestern kunsthalle until 1943 when it received a gift of nearly 300 pieces created by American artists who were employed by the US Government under the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project during the Great Depression of the 1930s.³ This gift was primarily works on paper—drawings, prints, watercolors, and photographs, establishing the museum's first collecting focus which continues to this day—but also included block printed textiles. In the following decades, Wustum regularly included craft media in exhibitions, as well as painting and sculpture. These shared interests continued organically until 1989 when the museum formally added a second focus in contemporary craft to its mission. This commitment offered the 11 million people living within 100 miles of RAM a specialization no other museum in the region was undertaking. Each year, on average, RAM hosts nearly 50,000 people from throughout the region, plus 30 different states and 15 foreign countries. The Racine community has a history of employing people in skilled industrial manufacturing. There is great respect for the work of the hand that makes a natural connection with local audiences who have used handwork in their industrial jobs. Every non-Western culture has excelled in more than one craft tradition, creating an opportunity to invite racially diverse audiences to participate in RAM's exhibition and education programs. At the same time, presenting craft in the same exhibitions as graphics and photographs presents these media in ways that highlight their similarities rather than their differences.⁴

In 1991, Karen Johnson Boyd, a local collector, donated 200 artworks to Wustum that immediately established nationally significant holdings of ceramics, contemporary basketry, and artist-made jewelry. The national attention this received attracted gifts of multiple objects from individuals living in 32 states across the US. By the late 1990s, Wustum had assembled one of the three most significant craft collections in any American art museum, growing from a few hundred works in the early 1980s to over 2,500.⁵ By this time, the objects had outpaced the resources of the Wustum facility. Opening a new larger space, a few miles away, in the downtown redevelopment district, became a reality with the donation of a building. RAM became a platform on which the museum could present its nationally

³ The WPA was a government program that paid out-of-work people to build public works projects such as bridges, roads, and parks but through its Federal Art Project (FAP), it also funded artists. It paid them to create murals for public buildings and artworks for traveling exhibitions to build the public's morale during the Great Depression, which began in the US in 1929. In Milwaukee, the WPA established a Handicraft Project in which people were paid to create block printed textiles, quilts, and furniture (among other things) for public buildings and relief centers for homeless people. The FAP eventually sustained about 10,000 people nationally from 1935-1943.

⁴ From the statement *Contemporary Craft* from RAM's Strategic Plan, which makes this a core part of the institution's mission.

⁵ In the US, donors of artworks to museums are allowed to deduct the current appraised value of artworks they contribute to art museums, regardless of their original purchase price. While Wustum had few acquisition funds with which to make outright purchases, it was able to successfully build an important collection through gifts of actual objects. Instead of the state or federal government providing acquisition funds, individuals offer works and the museum decides which gifts to accept.

important collection in galleries that are five times the size of those at Wustum.⁶ By providing a more visible forum for contemporary craft, RAM has attracted more donations and since opening in 2003, its holdings have grown by nearly 400%.

RAM's textiles provide an example of how each craft medium functions within the museum's programming and mission. Although RAM began acquiring fibers in the 1940s, serious activity did not start until the establishment of the craft focus in 1989 and the Boyd gift in 1991. Today, its textiles number nearly 1,500 pieces. RAM represents artists with national and international reputations and a wide range of techniques, materials, and aesthetic concepts. Since 1991, gifts have established a number of fiber specializations, including baskets, large-scale sculptures and installations, stitched works, handmade clothing, and contemporary Polish artists to name a few. RAM also presents a broad examination of the kinds of pieces in which textile techniques and fibrous materials have been utilized. For example, many of its baskets and even some large-scale sculptures employ knotting, coiling, and netting—methods that have been used for thousands of years to fashion functional objects such as fishing nets and food storage containers.⁷ Carol Eckert, Diane Itter, and Claire Zeisler are examples of artists who have employed these ancient practices for making works that deal with present-day concepts. Eckert creates small-scale sculptures depicting animals from different myths and legends while Itter made small-scale abstract pieces for the walls that were richly colored and patterned. Zeisler is one of the American artists who joined the Europeans in the 1960s and 1970s, taking textiles off the gallery walls to create freestanding sculptural statements, often in large-scale. At the other end of the historical spectrum are artists investigating technology, such as Lia Cook, who employs a computer to input how a piece is going to be woven and then uses a loom for the actual fabrication of her work. Cook's figurative pieces are woven so that the image subtly shifts in and out of focus, reminiscent of how memory and perception function.

In communicating ideas and aesthetic concepts, textile artists have specifically selected fibers as their medium for expression. Compared to painting, for example, the tactile nature of these materials and the repetitive and controlled techniques associated with their fabrication bring entirely different approaches to a textile's creation. The associations the public has with fibers can frequently be more intimate and positive than their feelings for painting because people have emotional connections in their daily lives to their favorite clothing, household linens, and family heirlooms. This historic role of fibers in domestic life becomes an opportunity for some artists to underscore their ideas rather than functioning as a limitation. The connection of these materials to the tradition of "women's work" and the use of stitching to embellish domestic linens, sew quilts, and repair clothing are seen by these artists as opportunities to make aesthetic statements that comment on social norms and deal with issues of politics, race, and gender. The built-in familiarity of this medium, creates a zone of comfort where artists can pose challenging questions without pushing the viewer away.

⁶ Wustum is still part of RAM's two-campus operation. The original museum is home to RAM's studio and interpretive education programs and also exhibitions for artists with regional reputations. RAM is home to the museum's collection exhibitions and it presents works by artists with national and international reputations.

⁷ Press, Nancy Neumann, "Knots and Nets: Connecting with the Human Spirit," in *Knots and Nets*, exh. cat. (Ithaca, NY: Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, 1988), 5-6.

At RAM, these stitched expressions include Renie Breskin Adams' narrative works, depicting the psychological aspects of her own domestic life with an almost surrealistic and energetic amount of activities taking place. Mary Bero's stitched, painted, and collaged dream images frequently include portraits of herself and others fragmented, similar to the masklike faces in Cubist portraits, combined with the bright colors of German Expressionism.⁸ In his stitched superhero comic book covers, Mark Newport combines embroidery, a pastime traditionally associated with women, with a form of literature commonly connected to young men. Anne Wilson highlights the holes in found vintage household linens by embellishing them with thread or hair, helping the viewer to think about marking the passing of time, noting loss, or acknowledging the existence of the social rituals that are part of life.

RAM maintains close contacts with collectors across the country and their participation, as donors, greatly expands the museum's reach across the field. In 2008, the craft and folk art collector, Lloyd Cotsen, donated a 166-piece gift of contemporary baskets made primarily by American women artists. Thanks to the notoriety the Cotsen gift brought to RAM, the museum is now home to over 500 baskets—one of the largest groupings of its kind in North America. Cotsen's gift included multiple examples by leaders in the field that enabled RAM to establish in-depth representations of major artists.⁹ This includes large-scale visually energetic sculptures by Lillian Elliott in which she interconnects rattan chair caning with wood splints and Dorothy Gill Barnes' conceptual vessels of wood, branch, and bark. Barnes harvests some of her material from trees marked for eventual cutting which she has scarred earlier to create decorative markings as the saplings continue growing. One of the leaders in using basketry techniques to make conceptual works of art is John McQueen whose pieces address his reverence for nature and interest in language. He employs bark and twigs, connected with commercial plastic rivets and zip ties, to create three-dimensional assemblages of text—from letters to entire paragraphs—and makes vessels with stitched "skins" of tree bark with which he focuses our attention on nature.¹⁰

Other artists call attention to the imbalance between modern life and a healthy environment. John Garrett employs industrial and common consumer goods—copper sheeting, metal hardware cloth, and plastics—to construct vessels that are lively sculptural comments on recycling and that seek a new kind of beauty in discarded materials. Equally adept at reusing and adapting supplies from nature and cast-off everyday items, Gyöngy Laký makes vessels and large-scale sculptures that spell out verbal messages that take on different meanings when they are placed on display in galleries. The popularity of basketry in the US is due, in large part, to the work of Ed Rossbach whose interest in off-loom weaving led him to champion basketry as a fine art medium, beginning in the 1970s. He was an early and influential proponent of using consumer goods such as newspaper and plastics and his ideas received widespread attention through teaching—most notably at the University of California, Berkeley.¹¹

⁸ Smith, Barbara Lee, *Celebrating the Stitch: Contemporary Embroidery of North America*, (Newtown: CT: The Taunton Press, 1991), 50-55, 64-67.

⁹ Larsen, Jack Lenor, "The Tactile Vessel," in *The Tactile Vessel: New Basket Forms*, exh. cat. (Erie: PA: Erie Art Museum, 1989), 13-15.

¹⁰ Brite, Jane Fassett and Jean Stamsta, "R/Evolution," in *Fiber R/Evolution*, exh. cat. (Milwaukee: WI: Milwaukee Art Museum, 1986), 16.

¹¹ Larsen, 7.

The collection also has large-scale wall pieces, freestanding sculptures, and installations in fibrous materials by artists Barbara Lee Smith, who works in paper, and Jean Stamsta, who was an early proponent of tubular weaving for structures that played off gallery walls in the 1960s and 1970s.¹² Multi-piece works that occupy a sizable amount of gallery space such as Françoise Grossen's *Ahnen Galerie*, 1977, and Rebecca Medel's *1000 Kannons*, 1987-89, which were both exhibited in the *Biennial of Textile Art* in Lausanne, demonstrate fibers being used to create more immersive environments. RAM is committed to maintaining and presenting these pieces to reflect innovations textile artists created that linked them to what sculptors were producing in other media.

RAM also collects tapestries and contemporary quilts. The museum has an archive of the American painter and tapestry designer Mark Adams. He studied with Jean Lurçat in France and created large-scale commissions for public buildings. His archive includes cartoons and finished works and RAM frequently displays them together to demonstrate how tapestries are created. While Adams represents a classic approach to fibers, RAM has a quilt by Michael James that employs digital media. James was invited to review RAM's collection and he took digital images of pieces that appealed to him. He manipulated and printed them as yardage using a textile printer. The resulting pieced quilt contains altered imagery from other artists' works, James' own composed yardage, and text from a poem by Pablo Neruda about ironing. His production of the past 20 years utilizes modern technology such as brain scans and computer manipulation as much as it employs traditional thread and cotton fabric.

In addition to wall-hung textiles and sculptural works, RAM also collects handmade clothing (called Art to Wear in the US). These are wearable pieces created in a wide range of materials, employing stitching, dying, knitting and crocheting, weaving, and hand painting. RAM's clothing includes over 375 pieces and represents single artist studios and small ateliers that produce one-of-a-kind or limited edition works. RAM does not collect haute couture or commercial designers, for this field is well-represented in other institutions, preferring to document independent studio artists. RAM is one of only three or four US museums supporting this material on a comprehensive level. Artist-made jewelry is well-represented at RAM and its Art to Wear forms a bridge between these pieces and its textiles. Handmade clothing is frequently incorporated into the museum's exhibitions, often combined with works on paper devoted to similar subject matter.

RAM primarily has scarves, shawls, coats, and jackets and it is archiving a number of artists including Lori Bacigalupi, Ana Lisa Hedstrom, and Julia Hill. RAM has two examples from Tim Harding's groundbreaking *Great Coats* Series. These coarsely woven cotton coats appear to be decorated abstractly and are constructed in ways that recall the slashed garments of the Renaissance and the reverse appliqued molas of the Cuna people of Panama.¹³ When opened kimono-style and viewed from a distance, the imagery coalesces into representational forest and garden scenes. Akin to other textiles addressing social and cultural issues, some of the clothing even has political content. Barbara Brandel's jacket, *Sampler*, 1995, states in large letters, "Get Your Laws off My Body." Wearing this jacket is similar to walking with a protest sign. The piece presents a confrontational statement in a visual style that recalls historic samplers which were used to train girls in language, sewing, and how to be "proper" young ladies.

¹² Brite and Stamsta, 12.

¹³ Dale, Julie Schafler, *Art to Wear*, (New York: NY: Cross River Press, Ltd. and Abbeville Press, Inc., 1986), 296.

The largest archive of wearable art at RAM is a group of more than 130 scarves and shawls made by Randall Darwall between 1972 and 2003. In the second half of the twentieth century, Darwall created some of the most beautiful handwoven cloth produced anywhere in the world. Because he hand painted some of his yarn during the weaving process, the color arrangements in his works, change, diverge, and then return to the original palette in an improvisational almost jazz-like way, creating painterly woven fabric that is unique.¹⁴

While the majority of RAM's textiles were made by Americans, the collection includes numerous examples of work by artists from 17 different countries around the world and this international representation is growing. The largest concentration of RAM's non-American works are by Japanese artists. The country with the second largest representation is Poland, as seen in 40 pieces donated by American collectors Camille and Alex Cook. The Cooks headed an organization that supported textile art and artists, Friends of Fiber Art International. Friends hosted regular educational trips to Poland and the Cooks purchased pieces on these visits. In 2013, they presented RAM with works by 15 contemporary Polish fiber artists including Grażyna Brylewska-Pędzialek, Maria Teresa Chojnacka, Barbara Galan, Lilla Kulka, Andrzej Rajch, and Jolanta Rudzka-Habisiak, spanning the years 1982 through 2007. Galan's *Lniana Tablica*, ca. 1990, is a large hanging, gridded into 16 squares, each filled with raised shapes that suggest different knotting and braiding techniques. It simultaneously recalls tutorial aspects of historic samplers and "women's work" but also the subtle palette and grids of the Minimalist paintings of Agnes Martin. Kulka's *Na Ścieżce*, 2001, presents an image of two figures, executed in bright blue thread on a black background. The effect is not of two separate figures but of the same figure walking away from the viewer, receding in the distance. The patterning of stitches suggests falling rain and the dark palette recalls the mood and imagery of a film noir. RAM's representation of Rajch's career numbers seven pieces. Two large jacquard weavings, *Graces A*, 1992, and *Fale*, 2002, are excellent examples of his interest in optics. In both of these, Rajch creates the illusion of real space within a flat two-dimensional surface. His weavings are filled with black and white striped sections that meet, blend, and shift as they recall animal prints in nature, folded fabrics, and the Op Art paintings of Bridget Riley.

RAM enthusiastically embraced this gift because of its importance to its collection and its audiences. Poland's leading role in the development of twentieth century textiles made this grouping essential for the dialogues that can now take place between Polish artists and colleagues from around the world in RAM's exhibitions. That these individuals share common aesthetic interests but choose slightly different paths for their explorations makes the interactions between their works even more meaningful. In addition, because there is a large Polish community in Milwaukee and an even larger one in Chicago, RAM is surrounded by audiences who are interested in learning more about this material, because of their shared heritage. At the same time, the presence of this work at RAM acknowledges and proves the internationalism that has been a central element of the Fiber Art Movement in the twentieth century.¹⁵

In general, there are differences between the Polish and American textiles in RAM's collection. While both groups strive for mastery of techniques and the results are equally well-resolved, the Polish fibers tend to be more formal in their concerns—color, pattern, texture—than many of the American pieces.

¹⁴ Ibid. 127.

¹⁵ Kingsley, April, "Unraveling the Weave." *Fiber: Five Decades from the Permanent Collection*, exh. cat. (New York: NY: American Craft Museum, 1995), unnumbered.

While the Polish textiles include a few examples of figuration and landscape, almost all of them are abstract. Americans do work abstractly but there is also a strong interest in narration that can include critiques of social and political issues. This may say more about the history of these two regions of the world over the past 100 years than it does about the choices their respective artists have made in the past 30. It may also say more about the eye of the people who selected the pieces, something that influences museum collections built through the contributions of artworks from private holdings.

RAM has sketchbooks, studies, and maquettes for completed pieces created by textile artists and this collateral material is often shown adjacent to their completed work. The public is keenly interested in learning more about artists' thought processes and studio practices. Public education is an essential part of the museum's mission and RAM continues to operate the Wustum campus as a visual education center for studio and interpretive programs. To assist in these efforts, for more than a decade, RAM has been presenting a series of *Collection Focus* exhibitions for artists whose work the museum owns in-depth. These exhibitions function as small retrospectives, charting the featured artist's career over a period of decades. To document these shows and to add to the printed documentation on the field, RAM produces 20-page *Collection Study Guides*—with essays by curatorial staff and interviews—along with images from RAM's holdings. These guides are given for free to museum visitors with paid admission to increase public awareness. So far, RAM has produced *Focus* shows and *Study Guides* for Renie Breskin Adams, Dorothy Gill Barnes, Carol Eckert, Mary Giles, Rosita Johanson, and John McQueen.¹⁶

RAM is a fine art museum that specializes in craft, not a craft museum. This important distinction was established prior to RAM's opening in order to make it easier for the public to understand that the museum considers craft to be a fine art form. In addition to documenting the accomplishments of the artists in its collection and teaching the public about art and artists' aesthetic concepts, the museum seeks to make people more creative as a result of their visit. The works in the textile collection welcome the viewer—be they an expert in the field or a novice—and encourage contemplation and curiosity at whatever level of engagement they choose to participate. Contemporary fibers can have the same intellectual weight as paintings but reach the public in ways that quickly establish connections between viewer and object. In the US, people are currently discussing whose history should be told and by whom, and also what are the roles and responsibilities of art museums in this process. Textiles, with their ancient connection to humans from all cultures, ensure there are many opportunities for everyone's stories to be told, heard, and equally valued. RAM is proud to provide a creative space where it can act on behalf of the artists by introducing their work to an appreciative public. The museum is grateful for the wide variety of aesthetic statements these artists provide, enabling RAM to carry out this mission.

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¹⁶ Glenn Adamson, "Racine Art Museum: A Corner Chapel for the Crafts," *American Craft*, Vol. 63, No. 5, October/November, 2003, 52.

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Renie Breskin Adams

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Lori Bacigalupi

Dorothy Gill Barnes

Mary Bero

Karen Johnson Boyd

Barbara Brandel

Grazyna Brylewska-Pedzialek

Maria Teresa Chojnacka

Contemporary artists

Contemporary basketry

Contemporary craft

Contemporary fibers

Contemporary Polish fibers

Contemporary Polish textiles

Contemporary sculpture

Contemporary textiles

Contemporary works on paper

Camille and Alex Cook

Lia Cook

Lloyd Cotsen

Randall Darwall

Carol Eckert

Lillian Elliott

Fiber arts

Fiber sculpture

Friends of Fiber Art International

Barbara Galan

John Garrett

Mary Giles

Francoise Grossen
Tim Harding
Ana Lisa Hedstrom
Julia Hill
Diane Itter
Michael James
Rosita Johanson
Lilla Kulka
Gyongy Laky
Large-scale sculpture
Large-scale textiles
John McQueen
Rebecca Medel
Narrative craft
Mark Newport
Racine Art Museum
Andrzej Rajch
RAM
Ed Rossbach
Jolanta Rudzka-Habisiak
Barbara Lee Smith
Jean Stamsta
Textiles
Anne Wilson
Claire Zeisler