FROM LEGENDARY TEXTILES TO FIBRE ART, CULTURAL FINGERPRINTS IN TEXTILE ART

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Abstract:
In his *Manifest pour métamorphose du monde* (Manifest for the metamorphosis of the world) the great philosopher Edgar Morin, Pierre Gonod and the artist Paskua declared in 2009 that understanding the world is becoming impossible on account of the current fragmentation of thinking. They preach the development of a global conscience and the safeguarding of human unity and diversity. Metamorphosis implies the wish to transform visions and perceptions. Our vision is fragmentary, as our mental barriers can often be stronger. In enhancing this vision, it seemed essential that on should discover, contemplate and reflect so as to be able to appreciate the particularity but also the diversity of textile arts, of fibres and techniques in fibre art. In a more and more globalised world, textile arts can offer representations of society and humanity in search of a new identity.
Key-words:
Textile art, fibre art, diversity, cultural identity, know-how.

Rezumat:
În lucrarea *Manifest pour métamorphose du monde*, marele filosof Edgar Morin, împreună cu Pierre Gonod şi cu artistul Paskua declarau, în 2009, că înţelegerea lumii a devenit imposibilă din cauza actualei fragmentări a gândirii. Ei propovăduiesc dezvoltarea unei conştiinţe planetare şi salvgardarea unităţii şi diversităţii umane. Metamorfoza implică dorinţa de a transforma viziuni şi percepţii. Viziunea noastră este fragmentară, căci barierele mentalului sunt adesea mai puternice. Această viziune poate fi extinsă în mod esenţial prin descoperire, contemplare şi reflecţie - ca demersuri necesare în aprecierea particularităţii, dar şi a diversităţii artelor textile, a fibrelor şi tehnicilor utilizate în *arta din fibre*. Într-o lume tot mai globalizată, arta textilă propune reprezentări ale societăţii şi umanităţii aflate în căutarea unei noi identităţi.
Cuvinte cheie:
Arta textilă, arta din fibre, diversitate, identitate culturală, savoir-faire.

In order to explain these transformations, the present article proposes a revision of the process of evolution from a handicraft culture to organizational culture. The question that arises is if we can describe, evaluate and preserve our cultural heritage, in such a way as to go beyond

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the mere understanding of its various dimensions and thus realize the importance inherent in everyone who interacts with specific cultural fingerprints. In order to highlight the value of textiles, this very particular cultural heritage of mankind, there is no need to replace the general view of culture, with its ideologies, terms and definitions, but to understand the relation between traditionally transmitted arts and contemporary textile art. This applies not only to the concept of cultural landscape, related to textile art, but also to the cultural policy of international interest and the concepts that have paved the way for this particular field of contemporary art. Textile art today deals with transformations such as the magic of metamorphosis, where the imaginative human mind and the handicraft skill concur in creating a rich textile universe filled with tradition, innovation, creativity and modernity. To understand these unbelievable transformations of textiles from thread to fibre art, we propose to start from the legacy of legends, myths and stories.

During ancient times textile arts were held in high esteem. The Greek goddess *Athena*[1] was the favourite child of all-powerful *Zeus*[2] and oversaw everything from wisdom and war to the arts, industry, justice and skill. She was also known for her wonderful weaving skills. Another famous mythological legend is about a maiden named *Arachne*[3]. 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, envious of her success, was so offended by the girl's choice of subjects (The Loves and Transgressions of The Gods), that she destroyed her tapestry and loom and transformed her into a spider. Besides *Athena*, there is also 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 also the well-known legend of *Ariadne*[4]'s thread. The Greeks believed life was spun by *Clotho*[5], measured by *Lakhesis*[6] and the thread of

[1] Goddess of wisdom and strategy in Greek mythology, *Zeus*'s favourite child.
[2] The god of the sky and thunder in Greek mythology.
[3] According to Ovid's *Metamorphosis, Arachne* was a talented mortal weaver.
[4] A Cretan princess. Daughter of king *Minos*. She became the immortal wife of *Dionysus*. The meaning of her name is "most holy".
[5] Daughter of *Zeus* and *Themis*, according to Greek mythology. She is also mentioned in the 10th book of the Plato's *Republic* as the daughter of Necessity. In Roman mythology it

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life was cut by *Aetropos*[7]. These three sisters were known as The Fates or *Moirai*[8]. The idea that life was spun around a person at birth was a popular one in Greek mythology, literature and poetry. We can see The Three Moirai, or The Triumph of Death, represented in a Flemish tapestry (c. 1520), in the collection of Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Related to the thread of life stories in ancient China there is a legend of the Red String of Fate[9], a thread which holds 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. This is also popular in the tradition of cultures in the Far East.

Another interesting legend originates in the Rari village, located at the foot of the Andes in Chile, where a girl finds a horse's hair on the surface of the village river and starts to create a small fibre piece. This technique of *crin* is one of Chile's most distinctive folk crafts, halfway between weaving and basketry, which began here over 250 years ago and is still practiced by local women to create objects or small figures, plaited disks from coloured horsehair. After discovering the flexibility of horsehair they combined a

was believed that she was the daughter of Uranus and Gaia. She and her sisters were collectively called the Three Fates.

[6] He is the measurer of the thread of life woven by Clotho's spindle, which determines Destiny

[7] The inevitable. She was the cutter of the thread of life. She chose the manner of each person's death

[8] Moirai – It seems that in Mycenean religion Aisa or Moira was originally an abstract power related to the end of life. At the moment of birth she spins destiny, because birth ordains death. Later she is accompanied by the "Spinners", who are the personifications of Fate. The act of spinning is also associated with the gods, who at birth and at marriage don't spin the thread of life. Everything which has been spun must be winded on the spindle, and this was considered a cloth, like a net or loop which captured man.

[9] The red string of fate, also referred to as the red thread of destiny, red thread of fate, and other variants, is an East Asian belief originating from Chinese legend, also used in Japanese legend. According to this myth, the gods tie an invisible red string around the ankles of those that are destined to meet each other in a certain situation or help each other in a certain way. Often, in Japanese culture, it is thought to be tied around the little finger. According to Chinese legend, the deity in charge of "the red thread" is believed to be Yuè Xià Lǎo (□□□, often abbreviated to "Yuèlǎo" [□□]), the old lunar matchmaker god who is also in charge of marriages. The two people connected by the red thread are destined lovers, regardless of time, place, or circumstances. This magical cord may stretch or tangle, but never break. This myth is similar to the Western concept of soul-mates or a twin flame.

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Mexican plant fibre Ixtle (the so-called Tampico) which provided structural strength. Later on, this plaited disk became the emblem of the village flag, and so horsehair became the new Chilean gold[10]

These legends or other themes related to textiles, or textile art, such as the transformation of fibres or the symbolism of the threads, are related to the evolution of man as a transmitter of know-how. They all converge to form a history of innovation, a series of extraordinary transformations, which are part of the movement of life and the natural environment. In a global view, all continents, with their own particularities, share this heritage to join in the contemporary artistic dynamics, where creativity and imagination are fully developed in contemporary works of art and where differences mean enrichment.

In the "Manifest for the Metamorphosis of the World" (Manifest pour la métamorphose du monde)[11], the famous philosopher Edgar Morin, together with Pierre Monod, French futurist and political scientist, and the artist Paskua, advocated the development of a global conscience and the safeguarding of human unity and diversity. They stated that our understanding of the world is made impossible by a fragmented way of thinking. The confinement of topics makes it impossible to perceive and conceive fundamental global issues, hence the need for a mentality which links the various fields of knowledge and enables one to conceive the relation from global to local and vice versa. This policy is aware of creating a social, professional link between various cultural structures, organizations, so as to promote a cultural policy which invites us to reflect on the importance of our way of thinking and to take part in this great movement of transformations in our contemporary society.

From Threads to Fibre Art

As far as textiles are concerned, we can appreciate the diversity of fibres and techniques, if we consider spatial medium which invites us to

[10] Kevin Murray, independent writer and curator posted on the website www.craftunbound.net

[11] Edgar Morin, philosopher and sociologist; Pierre Gonod, futurist and political scientist; Paskua, artist, founder of the movement "International Art Movement for the Metamorphosis of the World". The three authors send a message to the world's artists regarding the dimensions of the global crisis (n.a.)

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discover, contemplate and reflect. If we refer to textiles especially, they provide a unique opportunity to discover both the technologies of the past, with a relay on natural resources, and the present use of contemporary materials and processes. This gives us a better understanding of the evolution and transformations of human conditions, meanings and way of living. In textile art today we can highlight the so-called extra-ordinary changes of form, techniques and meanings, which can be spotted, deciphered and assimilated by the eye. Textiles express their most sensitive, striking aspects, via a simple but very particular "key-words" system, threading its way between them, 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, and encouraging an intercultural dialogue and exchange in a more and more globalised world where the tendency is to unify all aspects of life. Where inequalities continue to grow, there is the willingness and the need to harness the energy of all nations so as to preserve and conserve this particular textile heritage, which illustrates society and humanity as well.

Textiles take form from a raw material that is chosen, worked on, transformed. This important choice is made according to local resources, but also to a system of values where symbolic stakes, social involvements, historical reasons and economic interests are intertwined. Today textile technology can be completed by the use of computer processes, different kinds of materials of synthesis, relying from the start on environment resources, whether mineral, vegetal, animal (hair, skin, wool). The use of varied hair (horse, camel), wool (sheep, goat), cotton or flax was very common in ancient times, but it is used today as well in contemporary textiles because the possibilities are endless. All over the world surprising vegetal fibres are used to produce textile pieces in different combinations: bamboo, raffia, rattan, orchid, bark, banana tree fibre, pineapple fibre, palm tree fibre. Animal fibres are just as extraordinary, such as sea silk or spider silk.[12]

The processes of dyeing fibres and materials evoke not only long-standing technologies but also the transmission of cultural and historical identities. We can identify particular ways of dyeing at the scale of a

[12] Specie of spider, *nephila madagascariensis*, *Les ailes de la soie*, Musée des confluences, Silvana Editoriale SPA, 2009, page 62.

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continent, country, region or population. For instance, the ancient technique of dyeing with indigo (a colour obtained from *indigofera* plants)[13] is used even today by different artists and in different regions of Africa (like Bamako), India, Japan. This process is the result of an operational chain which involves several craftspeople located in different places. It comes into shape as the result of different hands working on the fabric, a fabric which becomes a mirror of their universe. There are many different kinds of dyeing processes, transmitted from generation to generation, such as *ikat*[14], used nowadays all over the world by contemporary artists but also by a Philippine tribe, T'nalak, who use the traditional weaving methods with *abaka* fibre (*buntal* and *piña*), also called "manila hemp"[15]. We can see that techniques based on traditions create a new space of existence, a so-called cross-fertilization, where creativity is limitless.

Some rare pieces of our textile heritage are bear witness to human inventiveness and creativity. The tubular beads made of bamboo in the period of the Qing Dynasty in China were used to create coats which allowed the skin to breathe and prevented the clothes sticking to the skin during the hot damp season. The breastplate item of armour made of rattan and orchid fibres in the Central Highlands of New Guinea by the *Daani* ethnic community or the vertical rigid tubular structure made of rattan[16] create 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 community represents a true technical feat, consisting in attaching a thread hank to a fixed point, distributing the threads in two groups in order to create warp and weft, then plaiting them in spirals. The result is a very elegant extensible *sheat*, dyed according to the *plangi*[17] technique, designed for ceremonies, marking

[13] *indigofera* – the Latin name of indigo. The plant was one of the original sources of indigo dye. (n. a)

[14] *ikat* – or *ikkat* , traditional tie&dye technique used to pattern textiles on either the warp or weft fibres. (n. a)

[15] *buntal* comes from a wide leaf palm, and the fibre is extracted from the stem of the leaf; *piña* is a fibre extracted from pineapple tree leaves *Ananas comosus*.

[16] *rattan* - fiber obtained from the palm tree *Calamus rotang family*.

[17] *Plangi* - ancestral tie&dye textile technique used to decorate the surface of fabric by the application of an external material, knots or cotton thread. Reserve tie&dye process consisting in pinching a part of the textile between the thumb and the forefinger to form a

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important moments of life (engagements, funerals etc.). Another example is a piece of African textile, made by beaten bark. Before cotton fabric and clothing came into use for the population of the Congo Basin, beaten bark loincloths were the only piece of clothing. Through different operations (soaking, pressing, during) they obtained a flexible and resistant fabric, which was passed under the crotch, tied to the waist with a belt and decorated with hand painted stripes and geometrical ornaments by the women of the tribe. Ancient textiles, techniques and materials are perennial points of reference and sources of inspiration for contemporary artworks. All these come together today as a single garment: art, design and craft, the expression of the inner self of the artist. From loincloth to fine cloth, these transformations in time became a contemporary concept: the art of clothing is no longer only about functionality, being followed by items of fashion design, draping bodies, more in tune with a body's form, thus often superseding the fabric's original purpose of cover and protection.

To illustrate a few specific aspects of textiles and analyze their importance, value and significant transformations in the course of time, we should briefly examine the case of fibre art as an example: in most of the cultural and artistic studies and speeches, fibre art is a term referring 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)[18] "Traditionally, however, they appeared as functional objects. The term fibre art, sometimes called art fabric, was introduced after the World War II to characterize new artistic developments in textiles. This article deals only with fibre art developments since World War II and with the challenges present in describing that art for inclusion in text and image databases. In time, databases might even contain the sounds of fibres as they move in currents of air. For the 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." (Lunin, 1990)

cone which is then tied. The result derives from the dye only being absorbed in the exposed sections. (n. a.)

[18] HENNING, Edward Burk. Chief curator of modern art at the Cleveland Museum of American Art.

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The 1950s brought the serious recognition of the artist-craftsman's contribution not only in the art of fibre but also in several media. During this period the studio artist revolutionized the creative concept of the object. In the late 1950s, Lenore Tawney, a weaver, moved to three dimensional forms with "constructions, evoking the power and spatial relationships of sculpture" (Nordness, 1970)[19]. In 1961 the opening of Tawney's exhibition at the Staten Island Museum heralded the first major exhibition of American Art Fabrics. This event marked the point at which "art fabric was healthfully and joyously launched in America" (Constantine & Larsen, 1981). The sense of creativity and imagination has nowhere been better captured than in the contemporary concept of fibre arts, started with the artistic trend of American expressionism during the 60s. Almost at the same time there occurs a similar artistic phenomenon in Europe, started with the first Tapestry Biennial of Lausanne[20] (first edition in 1962), with the participation of Polish artists – Maria Chojnacka, Krystyna Czarnocka, Wojcziech Sadley, Magdalena Abakanowicz[21] – who initiate 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 exists in oppression meets all that strives for liberation in every sense of this word" – Artur Starewicz wrote about his works. These Polish textile artists redefined textile art during the 60s and 70s by combining the power of expressivity and creating innovative forms, with a

[19] L. Nordness, 1970, pp.13.

[20] Major artistic exhibition in Europe organized by the Centre International de la Tapisserie Ancienne et Moderne (CITAM), initiated by Pierre Pauli (1916–1970), curator of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Lausanne and Jean Lurçat, the French painter/ tapestry artist. For over thirty years Lausanne was the capital of contemporary textile art, thanks to its International Tapestry Biennials. (HUhttp://www.toms-pauli.chUH).

[21] Magdalena Abakanowicz, is one of the most distinguished artists of the latter half of the 20th century. She studied at Warsaw's Academy of Fine Arts from 1950-1954. Having completed her studies, in the 1960s, she began to develop her own, individual technique. Using textiles, a medium which, traditionally, come closer to painting, she started to create monumental and autonomous sculpted works relating to a broad concept of human identity in both a universal and a private, if not even intimate, dimension. These works, towering structures, suspended, as a rule, from the gallery ceiling, and so characteristic of Abakanowicz, were known as Abakans. (Exhibition at the National Museum in Krakow, 2010, Curator: Dominik Kuryłek, HUwww.muzeum.krakow.plUH).

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deep respect for the qualities of the materials and their textures, which was later to characterize 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, textile works of art. The French tradition of tapestry woven from fine wool, linen or silk was transformed by the Polish weavers when they introduced in their works uneven hand-spun wool, thick cotton cord, and hemp rope. By exploiting the organic qualities of these materials and using unconventional weft yarns, they created an intuitively developed texture with a very particular expressivity.

Following these artistic developments there is a very particular and special fibre art trend in Japan. To mention only a few important artists and works presented last year in New York at Japan Society's Galleries, and this year at The Museum of Craft and Folk Art (MOCFA) in San Francisco, within the exhibition entitled *Fibre Futures: Japan's Textile Pioneers*, we should refer to: Akio Hamatani's "W-Orbit", Hiroko Watanabe's[22] "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's collective works "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."[19](Lawrence, 2011)

Through textile art, there is a networking world of reference, a heritage network which corresponds to the idea of opening up to appreciating the permanence and innovation of know-how and the perpetuation of human genius. Through textile crafts and arts, creation reveals the expression of cultural identity, the link between the artisanal and the artistic becoming a metamorphosis of materials, from nature to textile, enriched with colours, motifs, meanings, concepts, which illustrates the diversity of

[22] Hiroko Watanabe, President of International Textile Network, Japan.

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textile know-how. Textiles reflect societies and reveal unique human experience, thus aiming to progress from ordinary points of view to an enriched perception of the world.

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